THE LOVELY MRS. BLAKE

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BY

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WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY

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CHAPTER I

THE EMPTY ROOM

MRS BLAKE disappeared on Thursday, April 29th Her husband, George Courtney Blake, had been presiding over the petty sessions court at Midham He had had rather a trying day, his trials had been of various kinds He returned to his house, The Beeches, about half-past four He had ridden home As he transferred his horse to the attendant groom, the man noticed that his master seemed tired and worried, and even a trifle dishevelled In general, Mr Blake was the tidiest of men, the groom, Sam Kennard, who had quick eyes, observed that his tie was a little crooked, and that, as it were, there was an air of slight derangement about his entire costume

"Had trouble with the mare, sir?" he inquired.

"Trouble? No, why do you ask?"

"She was a little fresh this morning, sir. I wondered if she'd been up to any of her tricks"

"Not with me."

Mr Blake went up the steps into the house

"Looks to me," said Sam to himself, as he led the mare to the stables, "as if he'd had a tumble, he looks as if he'd had something"

On entering the house Mr. Blake asked for his wife. Cox, the butler, who met him in the hall, said that he believed that Mrs Blake was upstairs in the nursery, adding the information that Adams, the nurse, was out, and that he believed that Mrs Blake was with the baby Mr. Blake, turning into the lavatory, looked at himself in the glass.

"I see what Sam meant by asking if I'd had trouble with the mare I'm in a worse plight than I thought."

He straightened his tie and titivated himself generally; then he went up to the nursery The baby, its only occupant, was asleep in his cradle. He went to the side of the cradle and looked down at him The child, a rosy-cheeked infant of now nearly two years old, slept soundly, with a smile on his face which, according to the Irish legend, means that angels are whispering The father was struck by something which was on the baby's face—like a smear upon his right cheek He stooped, the smear was damp

"It looks like blood, yet—how can it be? Where can it have come from? He doesn't seem to have scratched himself. What's that?"

The cradle was of white enamel On one side of it, thrown into vivid relief by the white background,

was the smear again, in two or three places, in each case damp. He touched it with his finger to make sure, it came away red.

"It *is* blood What does it mean?"

He noticed something else. The carpet was a light colour, right across it, from an easy chair to the cradle, the smear continued, all the way there were great gouts of blood, still wet. He went to the easy chair itself, in front of it was a table on which there was a little heap of a woman's dainty work, which was probably meant some day to be a silken coverlet, adorned with rich embroidery. It was soaked with blood, as if it had been used as a towel to staunch some dreadful wound On the table, on the floor, even on the chair, there was still more blood Startled, Mr Blake looked round the room, as if all at once conscious that something strange was in the air On the other side was a door which led into the night nursery He crossed to it and threw it open The room was empty, but just inside the doorway something red was lying He picked it up It was a woman's handkerchief, all reeking, from one of the corners his wife's initials flamed up at him.

"Doris!" he cried "Doris! Where are you? What does all this mean?"

He held the handkerchief out in front of him as if commanding a solution to the riddle No one answered He crossed the apartment into the passage beyond, looking up and down, no one was in sight,

or apparently within sound He returned to the day nursery, seeming to hesitate whether to ring the bell, then, as if fearful of rousing the child, decided not to. He passed from it along the passage to his wife's own sitting-room, which was called the Grey Room—perhaps because its scheme of decoration was in silver and grey A charming apartment it was, illustrative of a woman who had both taste and money. Traces of recent feminine occupancy were everywhere, but that was all, tenant at that moment it had none. He looked about him as if for traces of what he had seen in the nursery, but no crimson stains were there Thence to the bedroom beyond, it also was empty A photograph set in a frame—his own photograph—lay on the floor before the dressing-table, looking as if it had been trampled under foot, the frame was broken, the glass shattered, the photograph disfigured almost beyond recognition That was the only thing in the room suggestive of the unusual; but, seemingly, that was enough He stood staring down at all that was left of his portrait as if all at once conscious that he was in the presence of tragedy He returned to the Grey Room and rang the bell A footman answered.

"Where is Mrs Simmons?"

"I believe Mrs Simmons is out, sir, I know she went out, and I don't think she has returned But I will inquire"

"Has Mrs Blake gone out also?"

"Not that I'm aware, sir. I understood that she was in the nursery, she was there, I know."

"How long since?"

"She was there when Adams went out, perhaps an hour since—or it may be a little more."

"She's not there now; possibly she also has gone out"

Mr. Blake was conscious that the man left the room with something on his face which suggested that he could not altogether make his master out; he could not altogether make himself out. He did not dare ask himself what made his heart so heavy within him. He went practically all over the house looking for his wife; nowhere was she to be found, no one had seen her, everyone supposed her in the nursery; certainly no one had seen her go out. He had his tea alone, giving instructions that when Mrs. Simmons returned she was to be at once shown in to him. Simmons was his wife's maid, a grave-faced woman, inclined to stoutness, whose dark hair showed a tendency to lose something of its darkness He could neither drink nor eat, an untasted cup of tea was before him when Simmons came in, still wearing her bonnet and her gloves.

"They tell me that you wish to speak to me, sir."

"Shut the door." She looked at him, as if conscious of something strange in his manner. "Where's Mrs. Blake?"

"Mrs. Blake?" The woman stared. "Isn't she in the nursery, sir? I left her there. It's Adams's afternoon out. Mrs Blake sent me on an errand to the village; she said that she didn't feel like going out herself, and that I should find her in the nursery when I came back. I've been delayed a little, but I've been as quick as I could."

"Come with me to the nursery." Mr. Blake led the way, the woman followed. When they were both in he closed the door. "What's that?"

He crossed to the cradle; Simmons went after him. The baby still slept. He pointed to the smear upon its cheek.

"And this?" He pointed to the smears upon the cradle. "And these?" To the gouts of blood upon the carpet. "And that?" Returning to the work-table, he called her attention to the ensanguined silk, to the stains upon the table, the marks upon the chair. "And this? I found it just inside the doorway of the night nursery. What does this mean? Simmons, where is Mrs Blake?"

The woman seemed bewildered, as was not odd; there was something bewildering in Mr. Blake's bearing, in the things he had pointed out, in the questions he had asked, in his way of asking them.

"I haven't an idea, sir; I can only tell you, as I did already, that she was in the nursery when I left her, and that she said I should find her there when I came back."

"You can see for yourself that she's not here Where is she, Simmons?"

The woman drew back, as if from something which she saw in the other's face.

"Please, sir, don't look at me like that. What has happened? What do you think has happened? What is the meaning of—of all the blood—if it is blood?"

"You may be quite sure it's that. That's what I want to know—what it means. How long is it since you saw her last?"

"Maybe an hour, maybe a little more."

"She said nothing to you about going anywhere?"

"On the contrary, she said that she didn't want to go out—that's why she sent me out, as I've told you, sir; she said I should find her here when I came back"

"How did she seem? In what state of mind?"

"A little quiet, perhaps, but she seemed perfectly all right What has happened, Mr Blake? Why are you asking me these questions?"

"On your oath, Simmons, as if you were in the witness box, do you swear to me that you had no reason of any sort or kind to suspect that anything—anything, mind—was wrong with my wife?"

The woman seemed taken aback; again she shrank away, as if cowed by his manner, or moved by something which his words awoke within her. Her reply was scarcely an answer to his question.

"Why, sir, what should be wrong with her that you wouldn't be likely to know more about than I?"

"Mrs Simmons, if you have any confidences to make me, you'd better make them now, while you still have time"

"Sir, why do you speak to me, why do you look at me like that? What confidences should I have to make?"

"Is that not for you to say rather than for me? Consider, I have reason to believe that you are my wife's confidante—something has happened to her, of that I feel sure"

A curiously scared look had come upon the woman's face, as if she were afraid of more than met the eye

"I fancy, Simmons, that you know better than I"

"Sir! Mr. Blake! What—what do you mean? I know nothing—nothing"

"That you swear? Very well, Simmons, I am not prepared at this moment to impugn your credibility, but for some time back I have been conscious that you have been more in my wife's confidence than I have been."

"Oh, sir! How—how can you say such a thing?"

"I say it because I believe it to be true Something in the marrow of my bones tells me that something has happened to my wife, I can feel it in the air! What it is, God knows; and perhaps you know. I don't Something has been happening in this

room. Here are the proofs of it; something very like a tragedy God grant that it has not been a tragedy! I'm going to have the house searched for my wife—every nook and cranny. I'm going to have the park searched—the whole country-side, and if very quickly my wife isn't found, then, Simmons, you had better look out"

Without waiting for the woman to answer, he quitted the room Left alone, with a perceptible effort Mrs Simmons pulled herself together, it plainly needed an effort. She looked about her, as if fearful of unseen eyes and ears

"How much does he suspect? How much does he know? How much is he likely to find out?"

As she put the questions to herself she covered her face with her hands and shivered, as with cold, although the afternoon was as warm as if the month had been June instead of April

When Mr Blake reached the head of the staircase he was conscious that someone was entering the hall. He began to hurry down the stairs with unwonted eagerness

"Cox," he exclaimed, "is that Mrs Blake?"

"No, sir, it's Mr Watson"

A big, burly man was coming through the open door as the butler spoke The sight of him seemed to take the master of the house entirely by surprise

"Watson!" he cried. "Why, man, I entirely forgot that you were coming."

The big man laughed, showing a very whi regular set of teeth.

"That's a pretty sort of greeting from one's and especially from you, George Blake, after all years Why, man, I should have known you where; you haven't changed a bit Fortuna someone about the place had a better memory you for the fact that a guest was expected, becau found a motor waiting for me at the station, and brought me and my baggage too. Why, Blake, wh wrong with you? Why on earth, man, do you lo at me like that? Aren't I too substantial for ghost?"

"Watson, I—I'm afraid that something has ha pened to my wife."

CHAPTER II

THE VANISHED LADY

GILBERT WATSON was the impersonation of good health, and, one might add, good living His rotund shape and jolly face, with its twinkling eyes, which were shrewd enough although they twinkled, were in striking contrast to Mr Blake's almost ascetic leanness George Courtney Blake was after his fashion a typical country gentleman, of the modern, up-to-date kind, which takes life seriously, tall, spare, with a slight stoop, there was about him a certain air of aloofness which is supposed to be characteristic of the well-born Englishman If, on occasion, among his equals and familiars, he could be pleasant enough, his normal attitude was the stiff one of the shy man who, unless wholly at his ease, because sure of his ground, finds it difficult to unbend. Outward exhibition of agitation was so foreign to his nature that when Watson realised that he was agitated almost beyond the limits of self-control he himself was surprised nearly into speechlessness. The two men were alone together in the study, where on a table was still standing Mr. Blake's untasted cup of tea

"You'll think, Watson, that I'm frightf getful of my duties as a host, but the truth I'm a good deal upset I'm afraid I can tell you quite why—I hardly know myself, you mustn't laugh—it's borne in on me in so I can't explain that something dreadful has hap to my wife"

"But in the name of all that's sensible, Because the lady isn't in a particular room and th blood upon a handkerchief? The lady may have bleeding of the nose"

"I—I hope it's nothing worse, I'm not a per given to nervous fancies."

"I should say from what I recollect of you th you certainly weren't; a less fanciful person than y used to be I can hardly imagine."

"Exactly. And I'm as I used to be—which make it all the stranger, Watson, that I—I should be actuall afraid"

"But, for dear life's sake, of what, man? Can't you wait until there's something tangible to fear?"

"I wish I could, it's the intangible I'm afraid of. I'm in that state in which I've never believed when I've heard of it in other men, I feel as if I should like to swallow a tumblerful of neat brandy to keep myself from playing the fool"

Mr Watson eyed the speaker as if he presented a singular spectacle, which indeed he did. He seemed to be all of a tremor, as if he were moved by a stress

of emotion so great as almost to be deprived of his faculties. Mr Watson spoke to him half jestingly

"Come, George, don't take to neat brandy in the middle of the afternoon at your time of life You've got an attack of the jumps, I've seen other men with them before now But you're not the sort that wants brandy Your wife's all right, I bet a dollar, she'll be laughing at you before very long, when I tell her of the state you are in I suppose you did expect me—that you didn't mistake the date on which I was to come?"

"My dear fellow, not a bit of it. I've been looking forward to your visit for days"

Something prompted the visitor to put a question

"And your wife also, I hope?"

"My wife?" A startled look flitted across the speaker's face "Oh, yes, I'm quite sure that she was anticipating your coming, too."

Mr Blake turned aside, his guest regarded him as if there were something in his manner which, for the moment, was beyond his finding out. He spoke in the most commonplace of tones

"Things have changed with me since I saw you last"

"Indeed they have You've been the hero of a sort of romance."

"In a way I suppose I have. When a man's penniless one moment, and the possessor of quite a comfortable income the next, I suppose it is in its

way romantic; but it's been a very sort of romance for me—— What is man?"

Mr. Blake, who had turned half r standing in an attitude of strained attention

"Wasn't—wasn't that someone callin thought I heard my wife's voice, Watson.

"My dear man, what to? It's the win the trees you hear, or the call of a bird."

"It's more than that—it's Doris. She' calling to me, and—I can't hear what she says

Mr. Watson emitted a sound which was ver a sigh.

"If you can hear her calling then she can very far away—so that's all right Really, Geor you go on like this I shall think that you've bee that brandy already, and you'll give me the jur How Mrs. Blake will laugh at you when I tell l at dinner the story of her husband's strange b haviour!"

Mrs. Blake did not laugh, for she was never tol not being there to tell. For the time, at least, she had vanished. Mr Watson suggested, half laughingly, that her evanishment was capable of the most natural and simple explanation She might have gone out to pay a call upon a neighbour, her husband proved she had not done that by sending round to every neighbour within miles. Some womanly whim might all at once have come into her head, she might, said

Mr. Watson, have run up, on the spur of the moment, for a little jaunt to town There were three stations within reach of The Beeches, on different lines, the lady was well known at each, inquiries showed that nothing had been seen of her at either Even the light-hearted Mr. Watson was brought to admit that the position seemed an odd one

An exhaustive search was made for the lady in every direction The grounds were searched from end to end, no spot was left unvisited in which she could possibly have taken shelter. The theory was that she might have gone out for a stroll, have met with an accident, and be lying somewhere awaiting help. The theory was disproved by the fact that one or other of the searchers went over every yard of ground and found nothing—nothing which in the remotest way could be made to hint that she had ever been in that neighbourhood Then, also, there was the other fact—that no one had seen her leave the house. She might have gone out, it was true, through any one of many different ways, but it seemed, that afternoon, that someone had had an eye on all of them, no one had caught a glimpse of her. Three or four gardeners had been at work on the beds immediately about the house, one of them could scarcely have failed to see her. Men had been at work in the stables, with the doors wide open, they would have seen her pass Hers was a notable figure—one on which every man's eye liked to rest, since none had seen her, in

such circumstances, the inference seemed that she had not been there to see.

Yet, if she had not left the house, what then? What had become of her? Where could she be hidden? The building was searched from roof to basement—every room in it, every cupboard, every corner—without result. They even ransacked the cellars, as if it were possible to conceive a reason why so dainty a lady should have taken shelter there And yet, in spite of everything which went to show the contrary, her husband reiterated his belief that his wife was somewhere in the house.

"Why do you say so?" inquired his friend "On what grounds?. You admit they've looked everywhere, where haven't they looked? They've even looked up the chimneys Are you hinting that anywhere about the place there's a secret door or a secret room?"

"I never heard of one"

"The house isn't such a very old one, I should say late Georgian I'm not aware they dealt in such ornaments as secret doors and secret rooms in George the Third's time Is there likely to be anything of the kind about the place without your knowing it?"

"Don't be absurd! Of course there isn't. Not only am I intimately acquainted with the plan of the house which is in that drawer there, but, to all intents and purposes, I know every brick in the building I'm not thinking of anything of that kind,

but, all the same, I've a feeling that she's somewhere in the house"

Mr Watson made a slight movement with his shoulders; he looked at his host with a comical look in his eyes, which suggested resignation blended with amusement, and something else What was the use of remonstrating with a man who talked like that? Mr Watson had still had no dinner, there seemed to be no immediate prospect of the meal, neither he nor his host was dressed, the guest had not even had time to wash and make himself presentable after his journey from town Already in his heart a wish was beginning to be half formed that he had never quitted town Blake was his friend, they had gone through some queer passages together, at various times, but this missing lady—he had never seen her. He had heard, by a side wind, that Blake had married a very beautiful woman, that hers were some of the finest attributes of her sex, that she and her husband were as happy together as the days were long He had been rather curious to see her. Blake had not struck him as being a marrying man, he wondered how he had become possessed of so radiant a being, if she really was so desirable a creature as he had heard He had accepted Blake's invitation, partly because he wished to see his friend again, partly because he wished to make the acquaintance of his wife, but he had never bargained for an episode of this kind inaugurating his arrival If the

lady had wanted to disappear, she might have done it a day or two before; he would have postponed his coming till the first shock of her disappearance had passed over, or till she was found again. He had known so many stormy passages that he had grown to love the quiet ways; the last thing he had expected was to find himself in an atmosphere of what looked very much like tragedy. Then there was his dinner; he had had a light lunch and nothing since. The hour was well past eight; he needed food. How long, in that house, could a guest be expected to go hungry?

He had joined in the hunting for the vanished lady, walked all over the grounds, gone through the house more thoroughly than ever did house agent's clerk. When he seemed to see trembling on Blake's lips a suggestion that he should go through it again, his appetite became too much for him—he protested.

"My dear George, I don't wish to appear unsympathetic, but apart from the fact that I don't see what you propose to gain by doing a second time what you have already done so well, will you allow me to hint that I've had nothing to eat since one o'clock, that I had very little to eat then, and that if nothing else is get-at-able, a little bread and cheese would come in admirably?"

Mr. Blake was filled with sudden remorse; he looked at his watch.

"Why, I'd forgotten all about it! We dine at eight o'clock, and it's nearly nine"

"I've been aware of that some time"

"Then why—why haven't they told us dinner's ready?"

"I heard your butler ask you what you wished to be done about dinner—if you wished to wait for Mrs. Blake's return, or would have it at the usual time, and you told him not to bother. Possibly the cook has taken the hint and hasn't bothered, which explains why no one has spoken to you since of such a commonplace as dinner."

"I'm afraid my wife is not likely to return in time, so I suppose I had better ring the bell and inquire if there's anything to eat."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea" Mr. Blake rang, his friend watching him, he noticed how his hand was shaking as he pressed his finger against the button of the electric bell—how the whole man seemed to be suffering. In spite of his own hunger, he felt for him.

"George, if you really think that something serious has happened to your wife, why don't you send for the police?"

"Police!"

Mr. Blake, swinging round, eyed his friend as if he had said some dreadful thing. Watson stuck to his point.

"Of course, I quite understand that you wish to avoid any scandal, but, all the same, a policeman is supposed to be a very present help in time of need I understand you're a magistrate; you ought to

understand better than I do if there's any membe of the force hereabouts who is worth his salt. I' only suggesting that, if the matter's so serious a you think it is, it might be just as well to lay the facts before the police, and require from them the assistance which it is their duty to give you"

"I'd almost rather do anything than bare my private life to the public eye That would be my wife's wish as well as mine"

Mr Blake spoke with unexpected sternness. Cox, the butler, who had answered the bell, stood in the doorway His master looked at him as if he wondered what he was doing there. He felt in his pocket as if for his handkerchief, then, as if unconscious of what he was doing, instead of his own handkerchief he produced a crimsoned rag, was about to raise it to his brow, when Watson stopped him.

"Good gracious, George! What have you got there?"

For the first time Mr. Blake looked at it, recognising what it was—the recognition seeming to cause paroxysms of pain to go all over him.

"My wife's handkerchief."

"But, my dear man," exclaimed his friend, "it's soaked with blood"

Mr Blake let the blood-stained morsel of lace and cambric fall from his fingers on to the floor Turning, he rested his elbows against the mantel, and covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER III

THE PORTRAIT

MR WATSON had seldom enjoyed his dinner less, even in the days when he had had to dine on less than sixpence and earn the money first. In the first place, the meal was a scratch one, and, in the second, it was eaten among worse than funereal surroundings. He would rather have eaten alone than have had such a death's head at the table as his host seemed to be just then. Practically, Mr. Blake neither ate nor spoke. He made several efforts to dispose of food, but all of them were futile; he seemed incapable of swallowing, and just as incapable of speech. Watson tried to start one or two subjects, but they got no farther than the start he gave them. Plainly his host's thoughts were far away. At that moment he took no interest whatever in his guest's recollections of other days, and he feigned none. He sat, his habitual stoop accentuated, his hands resting on the edge of the table, his downcast eyes fixed on the cloth, a motionless and silent figure. The visitor was heartily glad when the repast was finished.

"Do you mind," he asked, "if I go outside and

smoke a pipe? I'm still in the stage in which I prefer a pipe to a cigar. I suppose you won't come with me?"

"No; I won't."

The refusal was curt enough, but it was not uncivilly meant. Watson understood that quite well; he understood that it was an effort to the other to speak at all, and that what he had to say must be said in the fewest possible words. He would rather the man refused than accepted; solitude was preferable to his host's society in his present mood.

The butler opened the dining-room window for him to pass through. There was a terrace without. He stood for some seconds, drinking in the sweetness of the night. It was almost as light out of doors as within; the moon, nearly at the full, flooded with her glory the cloudless sky. There was a softness in the air. He gave a little sigh of content.

"This is better than Blake's face on the other side of the table—such a face as his is to-night."

He went down the steps to the grounds below. Taking a few steps, he turned to look at the house, all radiant in the moonshine.

"It's not a bad-looking place, this house of Blake's. Not much in the architectural way—Georgian houses seldom are; but solid and, from what I've seen of it, I should say distinctly comfortable—the sort of place which, under certain circumstances, might suit me. Though the idea of me with a house of any kind

is—droll. I wonder if it's too late for that sort of thing for me? After all, I'm not yet forty, though there was a time, not so very long ago, when I felt four hundred, and as hopeless a derelict as if I had been What a difference money does make to a man—my word!"

Turning, he pursued his way along a path which ran among the trees

"I'm a-born comedian Nature meant me to be one, I'm sure, you've only to look at me to know it. Yet all my life I've been cast in tragedy, and now I seem to be in for it again—this time combined with mystery. Hooray! There's something at the back of Mrs. Blake's peculiar conduct which I'd rather not understand, and I'm convinced that before long Blake will start trying to tell me all about it I wonder if there's any means of getting a telegram sent to me the first thing in the morning which will necessitate my departure by the earliest train? It may seem heartless, but I really wasn't asked here to take an active part in the curious disappearance of the beautiful Mrs Blake. I'd sooner—I'd sooner almost do anything Who's that?"

He had reached a rustic seat which ran round the bole of a tree, and was just about to seat himself upon it when he became conscious that a figure was moving towards him along the path in front—a woman's figure.

"If this were, by any chance, the beautiful Mrs.

Blake, what—what a joke it would be! Only, if she were to start making a confidant of me, what a joke that would be—especially if she asked me to respect her confidence, and never breathe a word to her husband as to why she made up her mind to disappear for everlasting. Oh, dear! what a vista the imagination opens! Hang me, if she doesn't seem as if she means to speak to me, whoever she is. I hope to thunder it isn't Mrs Blake. It isn't; from all accounts Mrs. Blake isn't built like that."

He could see, as she came nearer, that the woman in question was not very young nor very beautiful; she was bulky, plainly attired in black in a fashion which suggested a dependent rather than a mistress. Mr Watson's surmise was right; she halted by his seat with the evident intention of addressing him.

"You are Gilbert Watson?"

The question was as curious as it was unexpected. Mr Watson, who had risen when she stopped, regarded her with not unnatural surprise.

"That is my name; but——"

He paused; she finished his sentence.

"You are not used to being addressed by it by a perfect stranger."

He smiled at her

"You have taken the words out of my mouth. May I ask to whom I am speaking?"

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is that I am speaking to you Mr. Watson, I've come to

ask you to leave the house the first thing in the morning"

He stared, excusably. He was conscious that she eyed him oddly and spoke with a singular intensity, and that both in her glance and her tone there was not friendliness A thought crossed his mind for a moment as to whether she was sane; she looked it, yet—what did the woman mean by making such a request as that?

"Leave the house in the morning! And you say it doesn't matter who you are? Pardon me, but in the face of such a—shall I call it hint?—it seems to me to matter a very great deal"

"You had no right to come, if you'd been a man you'd not have come But such creatures as you are not men"

Mr. Watson was apparently so taken by surprise that he was nearly moved to laughter He had a quick eye for the humorous side of the situation, the onslaught was so unlooked for, and from his point of view so funny.

"You assume the position of critic and of mysterious stranger Isn't the double *rôle* a trifle too much? There seem to be some curious people about The Beeches. Who on earth are you? And what on earth do you mean by saying that I never ought to have come? Isn't a man entitled to accept the invitation of a friend?"

"Not when you're the kind of friend, he isn't.

Look at the mischief you've done already. If y been even a decent apology for a man you'd h been satisfied with the mischief you had done, wi out adding this."

He laughed outright; the woman's earnestn seemed to him so comical—he was so conscious th she was playing at a game of cross purposes. I laughter angered her.

"You may laugh; you've been laughing all thes years, I know. If I'd my way there would be short shrift for men like you—but it's no use talking Haven't you done harm enough without doing more? Why did you come here at all? What is the use? If you've a spark of manhood in you, you'll go before bad is made worse."

The speaker's warmth seemed to increase the listener's amusement.

"My good lady, you really must excuse my smiling—but aren't you mistaking me for someone else? You're speaking in riddles, as far as I'm concerned."

"I quite expected you'd pretend not to understand—I knew. But at the very fear of your coming, see what has happened to my mistress!"

"Your mistress?"

"I don't mind telling you who I am—not in the least My name is Simmons—Eliza Simmons I've been Mrs Blake's maid ever since she was Mrs Blake, and before—more than her maid. Although I say it, I've been her friend; at one time I was the only

friend she had, poor soul! There's nothing I wouldn't do to save her pain Do you think I don't know what pain you've caused her?"

"I? Good heavens!"

"Yes, you, and it would be much more in keeping with your character if you were to appeal to the other place instead of to heaven. Ever since she knew you were alive, that you were coming, she's been in a fever, and now, rather than meet you, she's gone God alone knows where—back—back to the misery and shame from which she thought she had escaped for ever—as if she hadn't already suffered more than enough because of you! There's someone moving Keep still, they mustn't see me with you. If, as I said, you've a spark of manhood still left in you, you won't breathe a word of what I've said to anyone, for her sake—especially to him, but the first thing in the morning you'll take yourself away"

She had lowered her voice, the last words came from her in what might be called a burning whisper. Before he could reply, if he were disposed to do so, she had flitted swiftly back along the path down which she had come As she went he heard footsteps on the gravel, her quick ears had caught them first, she had flown from fear of interruption.

He stood staring in the direction in which she had gone until a pull at his pipe made him conscious that it was out Taking it from between his lips, he

began to knock the tobacco out As he did so he seemed to be trying to get at the meaning of the interview he had just now had

"I seem to be in for a real good thing. If I'd guessed it before I came I'd have stayed away. Simmons her name is, and she says she's Mrs. Blake's maid—more than her maid her friend Seems as if Mrs. Blake must be in luck to have a maid and friend who is about as good an imitation of a lunatic as I have ever met In what way she associates me with Mrs Blake, dear George's wife, goodness only knows —that is, if she really does so associate me and she's not insane One thing I might have told her, if she had stayed—I'm just as willing to get away in the morning as she is to be rid of me."

He had emptied his pipe and replaced it in his pocket. He began to stroll slowly down the path which the woman had followed The steps on the gravel had ceased to be audible; all was still.

"I don't know how it is, like Blake, I'm not given to be fanciful; it's queer how reluctant I feel to go back into the house I'd give a trifle to have courage enough to turn tail and go straight back to town. Hullo! didn't I kick against something?"

Stooping, he felt for something which he was aware had come in contact with his toe, and found it Moving out of the shadow of the trees, he looked to see what it was It was a miniature set in a silver frame, of unusual size for a miniature It was the

likeness of a woman. Even in the moonlight he was conscious that it was one of the loveliest faces he had ever seen It was so light that he could see she smiled at him, the smile affected him in a singular fashion.

"Is it—a ghost? Where on earth have I seen her face before? It's a face which, once seen, surely a man never would forget, and yet—I've seen it, and can't think where. It's connected with no pleasant associations, that I'll swear."

As he stood staring at the portrait someone came running towards him across the path; he was standing now in the wide gravel path which ran right round the house. It was Mrs. Simmons, a little out of breath.

"You have it, I see I dropped it—I wondered where"

Snatching the miniature from his hand before he knew what she would be at, she hurried back across the path He called after her.

"Whose likeness is it?"

"As if you did not know!"

She vanished round the side of the house He remained standing where he was, on his jolly face a worried look, as if he strove to solve a problem He laughed ruefully

"I feel I ought to know; but—I'll be hanged if I do!"

He re-entered the house The man in the hall

told him that Mr. Blake was in his study. He went in to him; then, while still in the doorway, drew back, as if fearful that he intruded. Mr. Blake was on his knees beside a table; his arms rested on the table, his face was pillowed on his arms. The entire attitude of the man suggested despair. Watson realised, too late, that he had come unwittingly into the presence of a great grief, perhaps one of those great griefs when it were better that a man should be alone. He would have withdrawn had it not been for something on the table; it caught his eye from where he stood, and almost in spite of himself he advanced to look at it. It was a portrait of a woman painted on china—of the same woman that he had seen in the miniature a minute or two before.

"George"—the words broke from him unawares—"whose likeness have you got there?"

Blake lifted a haggard face.

"It's my wife. Gilbert, if—if I've murdered her!"

CHAPTER IV

MR. WATSON'S UNUSUAL MOOD

GILBERT WATSON was silent, aware not only that the other's words were ugly ones, but that he was in a state of nervous tension in which he was scarcely capable of realising the full meaning of what he said He endeavoured to pass the words over as if they were of no consequence. He took the portrait off the table.

"So this is your wife, is it? George, she is very beautiful. I've heard her spoken of as 'the lovely Mrs. Blake,' but I didn't realise that she was anything like this You're a man to be envied"

"If you only knew! You wouldn't say that—if you only knew!"

Gilbert Watson felt that the moment had come in which it would be well to make an effort to take, as it were, the bull by the horns; the situation would become intolerable—he felt it would—if he allowed it to drift.

"Look here, Blake, do you think you're using me quite nicely?" The other looked at him as if he did not know what he meant. "I don't want to

y one word to hurt your feelings, dear old boy, but ter all I am here at your invitation as your guest; ıd although I've only been here a very short time, an ɔur or two, already I'm beginning to feel that I'm ery much in the way. What's happened to ruffle ɔur domestic circle I don't know. I'm not sure I ant to know. I've a notion that if you keep your wn confidence you won't be sorry later on. Come, ld man, cheer up, going on like this isn't a bit ke you, I always used to think that you were ne of the least demonstrative men I ever met; and his isn't at all in keeping with that sort of thing"

Mr Blake rose slowly from his knees, and, once ıp, drew himself to his full height, taking the crease ɔut of his back His lip quivered, then, with an effort of will, he regained at least some outward show ɔf self-control His manner was a little formal, his voice a little harsh.

"I owe you an apology, Gilbert, you cannot know that better than I can I am conscious how poor a welcome I have given you, but circumstances have been against me—that I would ask you to believe. I—I have looked forward very much to your coming; you'll scarcely credit it, but it is so. I did not anticipate that when you did come I should be in the position in which I am It's a funny world, and it's the unforeseen which happens I beg your pardon, Gilbert, for being so poor a host. I had meant to be so good a one."

"George, you make me feel as if—as if I was the veriest cur that walks—as if you had any cause to beg my pardon. I feel as if I ought to beg yours a thousand times for being here at all But, since I am here, let's hope it wasn't an ill wind which blew me, after all Maybe you're in want of a friend. I used to be your friend, use me as a friend again."

"I quite appreciate your feeling, but—you didn't come here to be used in quite that fashion."

"Don't make me out to be a worse brute than I am. If I can be of use to you I'd like to be; but—can I?"

"I quite feel that a man can be in a position in which no one can be of any help, if that is what you mean It's quite probable, also, that I'm in that position now."

"I don't believe it—that's frank; and that's what's at the back of my mind all the time I feel that perhaps lately, for some cause or other, you've not been in the best of health, and that as a result you're in one of those physical states in which things seem so much worse than they are."

"Very well, Gilbert, I hope you're right"

There was something in the gesture with which the speaker turned away which went straight to the other man's heart Moving impulsively forward he placed his hand upon Blake's shoulder.

"Old man, what's the trouble?"

"I want to keep up my character—the character

ı which you knew me—as one of the least demonstrative of men"

"Don't talk like that, you know—and if you lon't I do—that I was only talking like a damn fool. Do you know, I've a kind of feeling that I've seen your wife somewhere, if that portrait's like her."

"It's like her, only it doesn't do her justice."

"If she's more beautiful than that, then, as I believe the Americans have it, she must be a perfect peach, if you'll excuse a colloquialism under the circumstances, George. Do you mind my smoking?"

"Smoke away; you'll find cigars on the side there, of all sorts and kinds"

"My dear George, if you don't mind I'll smoke a pipe, and my own peculiar mixture, each man his own mixture—I feel sure that was written somewhere of old," he continued to speak as he was filling his pipe "No news of the missing lady?"

"None, there never will be"

"George, don't talk like that; it gives me the creeps to hear you You're not a fatalist?"

"That's not fatalism—it's fact. Yesterday my wife was in my arms, as if she would never leave them; now I know she'll never be in my arms again"

"What nonsense are you talking? Have you two had a sort of a kind of a discussion—is that what it amounts to? Upon my word, I'm beginning to believe that you're making so much fuss about it

because it's the first difference of opinion you ever had"

"You're right—it is; and, also, it'll be our last. We never have differed before, and we never shall again for ever and ever."

"Why do you talk in that undertaker's sort of way? I suppose you said something to her which hurt——"

"I did; you're right again."

"And, in consequence, she's taken the bit between her teeth and done a little bolting to pay you out."

"You warned me, just now, against giving you my confidence, so perhaps I'd better act upon your warning. I'm afraid you'll find me rather a poor hand to-night, hardly a foeman worthy of your skill; but would you like a game of billiards?"

"Billiards!"

"I wish to do something for your entertainment"

"If you don't mind, I've had rather a long day of it, I think I prefer to go to bed"

"Very good, it's early hours."

"It's after eleven"

"Is it so late as that? I'd forgotten that we dined so late Shall I show you to your room?"

"I think I can find the way"

"Probably, but perhaps I'd better show you. It's a rambling house, and I've been told that the doors of the rooms all seem so much alike."

Mr Blake opened the door, then followed his

'st out of the room. He escorted him up the stairs the apartment in which he was to sleep. He ked about him with the anxious eye of a host.

"Is everything all right? If there's anything you nt you've only got to say so. Good night. I hope u'll sleep well, and that you'll have no bad dreams."

"Good night. If you sleep as well as I shall u'll be all right; I'm a whale at sleeping."

Left alone, Mr. Watson stared at the door through iich his host had gone Then he smiled as if some-ing tickled him; yet a little wryly, as if the tickling ere not altogether to his taste Then he made an ipatient movement across the room, shaking himself he went, as if to be rid of something that weighed oon his shoulders.

"Upon my honour, this is a pretty state of things; id a nice place I've come to visit. The shorter I it my visit the better it will be. As he said, it is ie unforeseen which happens."

He looked at the bowl of his pipe, which, though was filled with tobacco, was still unlighted.

"I feel very like a brute. The man was simply onsumed with desire to tell me his troubles, and et I don't know what made me so reluctant to iear them, but I was. Where have I seen that voman's face before? In some connection which nade it impossible to listen to tales about her. Upon ny word, that's the simple truth It's queer, but t's so. Where have I seen that woman, his wife?

I can see her as plainly as if she was standing here, in this room. The more I look at her the more I feel as though I ought to know her, and the more I don't. Confound the thing! I wish I'd pleaded a previous engagement instead of accepting George's invitation, or found some plausible plea with which to excuse myself from coming, even at the eleventh hour."

He struck a match and lit his pipe.

"I don't feel like going to bed now I'm here; I feel much more like a midnight stroll—a good long stroll to give me a chance of walking it off, only I daren't"

There was a decanter of whisky on a tray and a siphon of soda; he mixed himself a drink.

"There seemed no chance of one downstairs, but there's one to be got up here—thank the piper. I stand in need of one"

He advanced the glass to his lips, sampling the contents.

"What was that he said about he'd murdered her? And what was the meaning of that blood-stained handkerchief? He said it was his wife's. How did it get into that condition?"

Suddenly he gave himself another shake, and took another drink, then put down the glass and marched again across the room with great strides, as if the longer the stride the greater the relief.

"What's the matter with me? That's a question which is more to the point There's something in the

of this house which gets upon my nerves, and til I came into it I didn't know I'd got any. What l that woman, that Simmons woman, mean by the nsense she talked? To the best of my knowledge d belief I've never seen her in the whole of my e before, yet she seemed to know me, and to know mething which wasn't very greatly to my credit. ie—she actually seemed to hint that I was to blame r what has happened in this house; she distinctly id that George's wife had been all in a fever be- use she knew that I was coming; that rather than eet me she'd done whatever she had done. I'm eginning to wonder on my own account what that ,. I should be inclined to say, without the slightest esitation, that Mrs. Simmons mistook me for some- ne else, if it weren't that she had my name—Christian ame and all—so pat, and if it weren't for my con- ciousness that, somewhere, I've seen Mrs. Blake's ace before; and a very uncomfortable consciousness t is. It fills me with a desire to put ten thousand miles between this house and me—and more, if I could manage it What on earth was that?"

Taking his pipe out of his mouth, he stood with it in his hand to listen, an odd expression on his face.

"That was a very queer noise Was it a baby crying, or was it a woman? It gave me quite a start A pretty state I'm in if I start at a thing like that More whisky, please."

He paused, with the glass half-way to his lips.

"I'm not sure that this is a very excellent thing to do; I jeered at Blake when he talked about neat brandy However, here goes."

And the whisky went. He filled himself another tumbler, smiling to himself as he splashed the soda in.

"We'll be sparing with the siphon, as there's only one; and the whisky is really good Hadn't I better think about getting into bed? It's near the witching hour. Hullo! what's that I see upon that shelf? Books! If there's a real rousing yarn among them that's more my line. I want something to take me out of this quivery-quaky state I'm in—some tale of derring do."

He went to select a volume from among the others, then stopped in his task of selection, a volume held aloft.

"What on earth is that? That's no baby, that's —that's a woman. And if she isn't crying her heart out it's because it's already broken I have heard women crying, but I never heard one cry like that Where in thunder is she? Someone must be ill-using her."

He crossed the room on tiptoe, as if fearful to do anything to interrupt the sound which so upset him He stayed at the door, his ear against the panel

"As I live, I believe she's in the passage, just outside my room. What makes me—what makes me in such a deuce of a tremor? Ought I to open

he door? I can't stand this. What's the matter ith the woman? She'll—she'll make me positively 1."

He turned the handle, gingerly, as if afraid of ts being noticed; opened the door, at first slowly, nch by inch; then, with a sudden wrench, he flung t wide open, and stepped into the passage. What e expected to find there he only knew; there was othing to be seen The fact seemed to disturb him nore than if there had been.

"Where is she? Where has she gone? It can't e that my senses have played me a trick. I can ear her—I can hear her as plainly as if she were ithin a foot of me, as if she were crying at my feet hat, at any rate, is a tangible sound, I distinctly eard someone running down the stairs, and—what's hat? It's a door being opened and shut; and hat's people's voices. Good God! what an awful cream—like a woman's soul screaming in mortal gony. What the devil's going on? There's mischief being done somewhere. Is Blake murdering his wife again?"

CHAPTER V

THE LADY OF THE CAR

NEVER was there a finer April morning. So Gilbert Watson told himself when, after a hearty breakfast, which atoned for the deficiencies of the dinner of the preceding day, he passed through the open window of the breakfast-room into the cool, keen, fresh air, his inseparable companion—his pipe—between his lips, in full working order. He had breakfasted alone. He had not been sorry, word had been brought that his host was taking his repast in his own apartment, and asked to be excused He inquired of the butler if anything had been heard of the missing lady. Cox was a grey-haired man, who, in spite of his discreet appearance, in some way suggested a French comedian.

"No, sir; I am sorry to say that nothing has been heard."

The man had a pleasant voice; Watson told himself just the kind of voice which would carry well over the footlights It was for the sake of hearing it again that he asked another question.

"It seems very singular. Mr. Blake is much distressed Haven't you any theory?"

"Persons in my position, sir, are not supposed o have theories"

Mr. Watson was not sure if he was snubbed; but ie understood that it was a question which Cox lechined to discuss with him.

How sweet was the morning air! How delightful t was to get out of the house! He had the same eeling of which he had been conscious the night before, that in the act of stepping out of the house ie put away an odd something which oppressed him. He struck off for a walk; there was the seat on which ie had been smoking when Mrs Simmons thrust on him her singular insinuations; he smiled as he thought of it.

The private gardens were bounded by a light iron railing. When he reached it, as he passed through the gate, he paused to look at the house A substantial building, hinting at solid comfort. Which was the room in which he had slept? He fancied that the window looked out on that side, but he was not sure. How different everything seemed in the morning brightness! He laughed as he recalled his sensations of the night. What had been the matter with him—the meaning of it all? What was the interpretation of the weeping woman—her wails and cries; above all, of that dreadful scream? Was it possible that the whole thing had been hallucination? It seemed incredible, but, on the other hand, was the other hypothesis more credible? He had heard,

or had seemed to hear much, but he had seen nothing, although he had tried his very best to see.

The more he thought the more uncomfortable he became He continued his walk. He had come out to escape uncomfortable thoughts; not to carry them with him. It was not nice to think what the whole thing might mean—whatever its meaning was. Yesterday, as he had journeyed from town, he had been light-hearted, almost foolishly gay, conscious of freedom from entanglements and worries of all sorts and kinds Now, what a change! The most provoking part of it was that he had no rational solution as to how it had all come about. He felt himself to be involved in some unpleasant tangle, from which, so far as he could see, there was no agreeable issue. Bother the whole thing! He wished, with all his heart, that he had given The Beeches a wide berth, and gone anywhere else instead.

He would not think of the wretched business; he would go up to town by the next train even though, by so doing, he left his friend in the lurch. He had a conviction that if he stayed, perhaps only another four-and-twenty hours, George Blake might drag him into some mess which he would regret all the rest of his life. He strode on, nursing the resolve to escape as soon as he returned to the house. He hoped Blake would have quitted it before he went back; that would make it easier for him. In his absence he might steal away and leave a note, but in his presence,

if Blake was still in the throes of his anguish, it might not be so simple. So clearly did he perceive how difficult it might be that he began to ask himself which was the nearest railway station—he might walk over to it, send some more or less adroit message to The Beeches, board the next train, and ask them to send his luggage after him That certainly would be one way out, it might be a trifle ignominious, to speak of nothing else, but it was practicable; he felt that he was in a position in which any practicable way out was a thing to be desired He came to what he presumed was the confines of the estate. For some distance he had been walking up-hill through a long stretch of woodland which he had no doubt made excellent cover. There was a swing gate, opening into a lane beyond. As he went through it someone hailed him.

"Hullo! I say! You're the very man I want!" The voice came again in a different key. "I beg your pardon, I thought you were Mr. Blake."

When he looked round to see who the speaker was, Mr. Watson perceived that some seventy or eighty yards from the gate, along the lane, was a motor car, in front of which a lady was standing all alone. It was she who had hailed him. He moved towards her with his cap in his hand

"Although I am not Mr. Blake, I am his friend, and perhaps I may serve as a substitute."

As he approached the lady he found that she was

extremely young, probably not more than nineteen or twenty, with a pair of the biggest and, he could not help saying to himself, most impertinent and provoking eyes he had ever seen in a young woman's face. The manner of her greeting was in keeping with those eyes of hers, it was not without charm, although it was so free and easy.

"Do you know anything about motor cars?"

"Well, a little, that's to say—I—I know a car when I see one"

"That's about as much as I know. Unfortunately, that's not enough—that's the trouble. It's my opinion that when a man makes a motor car he ought to put somewhere in plain sight a table of instructions how to doctor the thing when it does go wrong"

"Does that mean there's anything wrong with your car?"

"Do you think I should be standing here if there wasn't? I've come for a spin You don't call this spinning. You're the first creature that has come in sight for the last twenty minutes, it may be hours before there is another. This lane leads to nowhere and nothing—that's why I came along it, because I thought I should be alone, and I am—with the car" She waved her hand towards the apparently unfortunate vehicle "Are you staying at The Beeches? What's your name? I'm Olive Norton"

"I am staying at The Beeches, and my name is Gilbert Watson. Won't the car go, Miss Norton?"

"Do you think it would be standing there if it would? Do I look as if I were that sort of person? That car is supposed to go I don't know how many miles an hour; and if I had my way, it would be going them; instead of which, there it sticks. I believe there's something wrong with the carburettor."

"Unfortunately, I don't know much about carburettors"

"I don't, either; in fact, I'm not sure that I know what a carburettor is, or where it is. I only say that I believe there's something wrong with the carburettor because I've heard people say that when there's something wrong with a car it is generally the carburettor which is at fault. But perhaps it is the ignition"

"I—I fear that I don't know much more about ignition than I do about a carburettor."

"Seems that we're in sympathy about the things we don't know, which, as things are, is awkward What I know about ignition isn't worth knowing. I know that there is such a thing, that there's a magneto, and that there's a circuit, and that it ought to spark, but whether it does or doesn't is more than I can say. I suppose you couldn't find out?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't"

"Not if you had a look at the thing?"

"Frankly, I don't think that would make much difference."

"Haven't you a car?"

"I have, but it's a recent acquisition, and I'm still in the elementary stages of learning how to drive."

"That's my case This car is my brother's. If he discovers—or, rather, when he discovers—that I've taken it out, all the hair will come off his head. I shouldn't be surprised if he's scouring the country after it now. I got up early; he went to bed late, and I knew early hours wouldn't suit him I got the key of the garage, and I got her out. Our place is at Rogate, about five miles from here; she's gone along splendidly so far, then I suddenly remembered that there was a railway crossing at the end of the lane, and practically no road beyond, so I concluded that I'd better turn her while I could—and I couldn't. I'm not much of a hand at turning a car, directly I began to try the thing stopped dead I can't tell you why I've been pulling at everything and turning every handle within sight, and nothing has happened so far—except that it's made me so wild that I should like to get an axe and chop the whole thing up"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you"

"I'm not going to. Haven't I a brother? And isn't it his car? And wouldn't he take an axe to me? Bryan's mad enough already, without my doing anything to make him madder. By the way, what's all this I hear about Mrs. Pl[illegible]?"

The transition was sudden; Mr. Watson was taken aback.

"You can hardly expect me, Miss Norton, to tell you what you hear; you should know that better than I."

"It's not true that she's murdered? Have they found the body?"

"I earnestly hope that she's not murdered, and so far as I know they certainly haven't found what you call the body. What makes you suggest such a horrible thing?"

"Then what has happened? Something has happened, I am sure, I can tell it from Bryan's manner."

"Bryan? Is that your brother? What can there be in your brother's manner that makes you think that something has happened to Mrs. Blake?"

"Everybody knows that Bryan's in love with her."

"Indeed? Then in that case I'm afraid I'm nobody."

"Could any man look at her without falling in love with her? I fell in love with her at sight, and I'm only a woman. As for Bryan, he's like tinder where a woman's concerned. Women are always setting him in flames. Since the first moment in which he saw Mrs. Blake he hasn't, so to speak, eaten, drunk, or slept; he's done practically nothing but rave, and go flying round the country on his car—this car."

"May I ask how old your brother is?"

"He's twenty-three—two years older than I am."

"I see."

"You think it's his age? That's what I tell him. I tell him that if he lives till he's thirty without being married and divorced half a dozen times—because he falls out of love just as fast as he falls in, and I'm sure he would have been divorced if he'd married any of the women he's loved so far—when he's thirty the fires of youth will have burned out, he will have arrived at a stage of comparative sanity, and if he falls in love and marries, then he may have a chance of not behaving like a perfect idiot."

"You said that something in your brother's manner made you think something had happened to Mrs. Blake May I ask what it was?"

"I believe that yesterday he told Mrs Blake that he loved her—or else Mr. Blake."

"Why Mr. Blake?"

"He told me yesterday that he had to make a clean breast of it to someone, and if he couldn't do it to the lady he'd have to do it to the husband, and he'd do it, too—like this."

She threw herself into an attitude which Mr. Watson thought became her uncommonly well, indeed, she was having an effect on him which he was quite unable to describe.

"'Mr. Blake, I love your wife, and have lost

fourteen pounds weight in consequence. I tell it you to your face, as, when I have a chance, I mean to tell it to hers. Nothing can stop me.' At this point he'd run his hand through his hair, and he has beautiful hair, has Bryan. I can't do it to mine because of this motor thing, and anyhow, my hair doesn't suit me so well when it's ruffled as it does him. Then he'd go on. 'You can kill me, Mr. Blake, if you like; but I tell you again that except death, nothing can stop me' If he talked to Mr. Blake like that, and I know from his manner that some scene took place, isn't it possible that when he went home one thing led to another, and ended in murder? Anyhow, from what I've heard something has happened, and I meant to finish my spin by calling at The Beeches to inquire."

"I see."

"You've said that before. I don't know what you mean by it, but I suppose you do."

"I fancy I meant in this case that I think your brother must be rather a remarkable young man, and—and——"

"What else?"

"And that I should rather like to make his acquaintance"

"What do you think of me?"

This was so remarkable and so unexpected a question, that it seemed for the moment to deprive Mr Watson of the faculty of speech For a gentle-

man of such ripe years, and such knowledge of the world, he seemed singularly ill at ease.

"I don't know if you expect me to answer such a question, but—I could."

Something in his glance seemed to make the young woman lose, for a moment, some of her self-possession. As if willing to avoid his eyes she looked aside, towards the refractory car.

"Oh! you needn't. I expect you think I'm an idiot."

"I certainly do nothing of the kind."

"Well, it doesn't matter, does it? I wish I could do something to make this stupid thing go. I don't want to stop here all day long."

"Let me try. I know I'm a duffer, but——"

He rounded off his sentence by taking hold of the handle and giving it a rapid twist. Instantly there came the familiar sound of the engine in motion; the car began to throb They stared at each other.

"That sounds——"

He went no further, as if the opening words were enough She burst into exclamation

"Of all the perfect sillies! Do you know, I never touched that handle at all, I tried all the others, but I never thought of that Of course, the thing had simply stopped"

"It looks as if that was the case, and you never tried to start it again."

"Well, I am the—limit." The young lady was

climbing into the driver's seat. "I'm awfully obliged to you; I daresay I should have stood staring at the thing all day and never thought of trying to start it—that's me all over. If you're making any stay you might look me up, and—I'll thank you again. Everybody knows the Nortons, of Rogate; there's only Bryan and me in the old house—it's his house, and everybody will tell you that we are not quite right in our heads, and that we live there like two wild animals, and other things that are nice; but if you'll come and look for yourself you may find out that things are not so black as they are painted. Will you come?"

"I will"

"Mind you do. Now I've got to get this thing round Bravo! That's done it Now you shall see her spin! Don't you forget your promise—I shall expect you at Rogate."

CHAPTER VI

AN OLD FRIEND

GILBERT WATSON watched the motor car disappearing in a cloud of dust along the lane with sensations which were stranger than any which he had so far felt since his coming to The Beeches—and he had felt some strange ones Miss Norton had played havoc with his inclination to steal away unobserved to the station; that invitation to Rogate was sounding in his ears long after the car and the dust had vanished out of sight. His life had been so fashioned that he had not had much intercourse with women; he had never met one who had appealed to some subtle sense within him as this one had done It was absurd, she was hardly more than a child—only twenty-one; while he—he was nearly twice her age. She was, as the most superficial observer could not help but perceive, a wild, harum-scarum thing—just the kind of creature who would make merciless fun of a man of his age She wanted boys, not—not veterans, who had already been through the heat of the day. Which made his sensations still more absurd.

And yet—were ever such eyes? Those eyes of

hers were haunting, great, big, laughing, daring things, through which every changing mood looked out on to the world. She also was a born comedian; and it was his humorous side which he always felt was strongest. Yet he could fancy that a look might come into her eyes which would not be comic.

What an ass he was to think of such things! Now what should he do—continue his walk, or return to the house? All ideas of slinking off to the station were gone. He remembered that she had talked about calling at The Beeches. If he went back and found her there, why—she might have something to say to him again. Whether or no she called, it would make no difference to him, plainly; still—he might just as well retrace his steps and see if Blake was stirring. After all, the man was his host; he did not want to be guilty of a *gaucherie* towards his old friend.

He would go back, and already had his hand upon the gate to open it, when for a second time he was hailed.

"Excuse me, sir, but might I speak to you?"

This time the voice was masculine. Somewhat to his surprise, a figure appeared over the top of the hedge at the other side of the lane, and began to scramble through a gap into the road—not a very prepossessing person he seemed. Perhaps somewhere in the early thirties, flashily yet shabbily dressed,

with a suggestion about him of uncleanliness which was more than external. He would not have been bad-looking if his face had not been such a weak one, and if it had not borne such obvious, unflattering traces of the life he had lived Without giving him the permission he requested, Mr. Watson waited for him to say what he wanted, he rather expected a petition for eleemosynary aid—he was not at all prepared for what the stranger actually did say

"Pardon me if I put a few inquiries to you, sir, but I believe that a friend of mine resides in this immediate neighbourhood, and though I'm on my way to him at the present moment, I don't quite know where. Perhaps you could give me the necessary information?"

The fellow spoke like an educated man, yet there are educated men who preface their requests for twopence with quite nice-sounding phrases.

"What is your friend's name?"

"Blake, sir—George Courtney Blake. You may not think it, but he and I were at school together, and we've had several rather interesting passages together since, though he is a personage, a magistrate, a man of property and of acres, and I——"

The stranger gave a little flamboyant gesture. "I have not quite kept pace with the van"

"You were at school with George Blake? Where?"

"At Rugby, sir, in the same house, though when

he left he was nearly at the head of it, and I was very nearly at the bottom"

"I was at Rugby with Blake. What's your name?"

"Halsey, sir—Edgar Halsey. May I ask what yours is? You've grown beyond my recognition."

"Halsey? I think I remember you, or, rather, perhaps I oughtn't to put it that way. I think I remember hearing of you"

"In that case I fear you didn't hear much to my credit"

"I'm afraid I didn't. Weren't you—expelled, after I left?"

"Expulsion is not quite the proper word; I—left the school; but there was no actual expulsion. I was a young scatter-brain in those days, and they made me pay hardly for it. But you still have me at an advantage, sir; you have not told me what your name is"

"You say you wish to see George Blake. Has he still kept up your acquaintance?"

"In a sense, sir, in a sense. George Courtney Blake and I had passages together which I fancy he would rather should be kept private. It so happens that I do not only wish to see Mr Blake, I also want—shall I say, still more urgently?—to see Mrs. Blake. That lady and I were, not so long ago, quite close friends"

"Before her marriage?"

"Exactly. I—I've been living in seclusion; it was only by the merest accident I learnt, the other day, that she was married. But you, sir, are asking all the questions and giving me no information in return. In the first place, where exactly does Mr. Blake reside? How far from here?"

"I believe this is a private road, but if you come through this gate and follow it, it leads direct to the house. All the same, I may tell you that even if you find him at home I don't think he will see you"

"And why not, sir? And if he won't, I'm sure his wife will, when she hears my name; and I'd really sooner see her than her husband."

"I very much doubt if you'll find that Mrs. Blake is at home."

"What ground, sir, have you for saying that?"

"I happen to be staying in the house, and she's been absent ever since I came."

"Staying in the house, are you? I will remind you that you still have me at an advantage, sir, and that you have not yet told me your name."

A twinkle came into Mr. Watson's eyes, as if there was something about the other which he found amusing.

"My name? I doubt if it will convey much to you. I don't think you'll recognise it."

"And yet you say you were in the same house at Rugby as Blake. Of course, I don't pretend to have been familiar with the names of all the fellows,

though, at some time or other, I fancy I must have heard them all. Perhaps you'll tell me what your name is?"

"My name is Gilbert Watson"

The announcement produced on the stranger an effect which was, in its way, electric. He started, fell back a pace or two, stared at the other as if he were some strange being, and seemed for a second or two to be unable to speak.

"Gilbert Watson! You are Gilbert Watson?"

"It would appear, Mr. Halsey, that you do recognise my name."

"Recognise your name? I should rather think I did! Of all the astounding meetings! It's—it's quite unnerved me"

"I'll tell Mr. Blake, if he's in, that by the time you've ceased to be unnerved he may expect you Good morning, Mr. Halsey."

Mr. Watson passed through the gate, shut it behind him, and without paying any heed to what the stranger might be disposed to say or do, began to walk briskly down the path For some moments the stranger seemed disposed to do nothing; he did not even follow the other with his eyes, but stood staring into space as if at some amazing vision

"He's Gilbert Watson! And he's staying in Blake's house! This beats anything!"

As he went, Mr. Watson also was communing with himself.

"Halsey? I remember the name. And the story—one has only to look at him to see that as he began he went on. What was he insinuating in his talk about the passages with him which Blake would rather have kept private, and in his innuendoes about Blake's wife? Scamp is written large all over Mr. Halsey. The less Blake or his wife has to do with him the better for both. It is out of men of his kidney that blackmailers are made."

The path wound in and out among the trees; as he rounded it to the left he came upon a large sheet of water by whose charm he had been struck as he went up It was fringed on all sides by a belt of fir trees, which in some places grew right down to the water's edge. The surface of the water was entirely unruffled, it was a stillness which suggested depth It had seemed so solitary as he passed it before; now its solitude was disturbed by a single figure. A man was standing on the bank nearest to the path, looking down into the tranquil water. He was surprised to see that it was Mr. Blake, something in his attitude startled him.

"So you are out and about, George. I've just been for a turn. A nice place you seem to have got here, and this is a nice piece of water. Looks as though there ought to be fish in it."

"There are—quantities We call it the fish-pond I'm going to have it dragged"

"Dragged? What for?"

"For her."

"George! You don't think——"

He left the sentence unfinished. Mr. Blake supplied, after his own fashion, what might have been the missing words.

"This water has haunted me all night. To me it has been a night of horror, I'll never forget it. I think the worst part of it has been this water. If I could, I'd have it drained and the place filled up, I shall never be able to look at it again, or think of it, with comfort All night I've seen her floating on the face of it, and—and the fish feeding. I'm going to have it dragged, if she's here I'll find her. If I do I'll never live in the house again—unless the water can be drained away"

The state of his host's mind had clearly not improved since their parting over night; listening to him brought back to Watson all his uncomfortable feelings He said, as much to divert the subject into another channel as for any other reason.

"I've just met a gentleman who claims to be an old acquaintance of yours, and, as I suppose, in a way of mine He talks of coming down to see you."

"What's his name?"

"Halsey—Edgar Halsey"

"That rogue!"

"I shouldn't wonder if he was something of that sort. I left him in the lane up at the top there; I told him that I'd let you know that he was coming.

I felt it would only be fair to give you a chance of getting out of his way if you wanted to I daresay he's already on his way, so, if you do want to give him the slip, you'd better come with me and we'll do it together. No, by Jove, we can't! It's too late, old man, here he is."

As he spoke the stranger came in sight round the bend in the path above When he saw the two men below he paused They regarded him in silence. Then, slightly raising his hat, he came quickly down the slope, with a note in his voice of what he perhaps meant to represent eager friendliness.

"Ha, Blake! This is an unlooked-for pleasure. I was just coming down to the house in search of you"

His friendly tone was not reciprocated by Mr Blake. He did not reply to the stranger at all, but turning, addressed Watson in terms which Mr. Halsey could not have felt were complimentary

"Watson, do you mind going on and leaving me with this rascal? What I have to say to him I think I should prefer to say in private, and I fancy he may prefer it also"

Mr. Watson took the hint and went.

"I should say there was a bad quarter of an hour in store for Mr Halsey. I never saw an uglier look on Blake's face, I didn't think he was capable of it. Possibly Mr. Halsey will regret that he sought an interview before it's done"

On his way down to the house he met some men leading a cart. He stopped them

"What have you got in there?"

"Drags, sir, Mr Blake is going to have the fish-pond dragged."

"I don't think I should go up to him for a minute or two. He's talking to a gentleman; he told me that he wished to talk to him in private. You'd better wait till the conversation is over. I'm sure Mr. Blake doesn't wish to be disturbed; go up to him, say, in a quarter of an hour."

Three-quarters of an hour later Mr. Blake came across the garden towards his guest, who was sitting on the terrace, basking in the sun.

"Well," inquired Watson, "what's become of Mr. Edgar Halsey?"

He was struck, as soon as he had spoken, by the appearance which Mr. Blake presented. He was bare-headed When Watson had seen him last he wore a cap, he seemed to have lost it, and to be unconscious of its absence. His hair was rumpled, his tie disarranged; there was an air of disorder about the whole man—a disorder which his words seemed presently to show, as he replied to the other's question, was internal as well as external.

"Halsey? What's become of him? I hope he's stewing in hell!"

The words were sufficiently surprising; the tone in which they were uttered was still more so. Some

violent emotion had so got hold of him that he seemed to speak as with a scream of rage. That he was half beside himself with passion there could be no doubt. On the threshold of the house, just as he was about to enter it, he stopped and turned again to Watson.

"I'm not going to have the fish-pond dragged; I—I'm afraid of what I might find"

The guest said to himself when the host had entered the house

"There always was a thread of eccentricity running through old Blake, but I never thought it would have come so much to the front as it seems to have done. If I were what they call in America an alienist, if he goes on like this I'm not sure that it would need much to persuade me to certify him as——"

Mr. Watson raised his finger to his forehead, then he took out his pipe and pressed the tobacco back into the bowl. Replacing the stem between his lips, he continued to look out upon the world with contemplative eyes.

"I wonder what did take place between Halsey and him—what Halsey wanted to see him about—what Halsey said to put him in such a frenzy of rage? George Blake seems to have grown short-tempered since the days of auld lang syne"

His thoughts took a different course, though he still wondered

"I wonder what's become of that car of hers—or her brother's, the minx! Has it come to grief again?

And has it again failed to occur to her that it might be as well to try a turn of the handle? She ought to be here by now. If she doesn't come I—I wonder how soon it would be decent for me to pay a call at Rogate? By the way, I might find out where the place is, and then, if I were to go for a stroll this afternoon, I might lose my way thereabouts; and—and it might be managed that way. I never saw a girl with such eyes."

Presently, rising from his seat, he went in search, possibly of someone who could tell him where the young lady lived.

CHAPTER VII

MR BLAKE'S LOVE STORY

THREE days passed. Gilbert Watson was still at The Beeches, though he had not again seen the young lady with the eyes, nor found himself within convenient distance of Rogate. So many things had happened, and so quickly, that just what he had feared had come about, and he found himself drawn into a tangle from which, with any semblance of grace, he could not easily escape Nothing had been heard of the missing lady, and so extraordinary an effect had this had upon George Blake that, almost in self defence, Mr Watson had felt constrained to make an effort to get at what was at the back of that gentleman's mind. And, in a measure, he had got there, in the course of the strangest interview he had ever had in his life It took place at dead of night—the third night after Watson's coming. All day the air had been charged with electricity, and worse, over and over again he had upbraided himself for having been such a fool as to have stayed, and now that the night had come, the inclination to indulge in self-reproach had become more pronounced.

He could not sleep, either his imagination played him the maddest tricks, or the house was full of the most fantastic noises. Indeed, he had not had any sleep to speak of in the two nights he had occupied that room, and as a consequence on that third night his nerves were all on edge; he was so much in want of sleep that he knew it would not come. He had got between the sheets, but he might just as well have stayed outside for any rest which came to him

The room, like the rest of the house, was lit by electricity, Blake had an installation of his own. He had tried leaving the light on, and he had tried switching it off, he was not sure under which condition he was least at ease With the light on he could not shut his eyes, it seemed as if he had to stare at it, with it off his fancy played him such pranks that he was racked by what he was conscious was a ridiculous and even childish sense of fear. And the things which he seemed to hear! And the compulsion that was on him to learn, if possible, from what source they came! He had to switch on the light again to learn

But there came a point in that eventful night when the thing went beyond imagination, he did hear things that were not the sportive creations of his sense of hearing And he got out of bed, resolute to learn what they were. He went to his bedroom door, and, opening it, stepped out into the passage

beyond. He had done this on previous occasions, and when he had tried to trace the noises to their source had found nothing. This time he had better fortune—in the sense that he did find something, though it was fortune of a curious kind. He went along his own passage, in the darkness; felt his way along the passage to his right, and, outside the door of a certain room, he stopped—always in the darkness.

He had approximately located at least one sound he had heard, it came from within that room. Someone was moving on the other side of the door, uttering sounds like a soul possessed. Watson hesitated. Even then he was in doubt as to whether he had a right to intrude; then his doubt was resolved by a further sound—one which startled him beyond anything which had gone before Someone on the other side of that door had fired a revolver. That meant things into which all men had a right to inquire. He turned the handle, and entering, found George Blake standing with the strangest look upon his face and with a revolver in his hand

"George, what—what are you doing?"

"Playing the coward—and the cur Is there anyone in the room but me?"

"What do you mean, man? I am here."

"And no one else?"

"Unless they're in hiding under the table, or behind the couch, or—somewhere."

"Then I'm doubly a cur. Gilbert, I just tried to blow my brains out; just as I was pulling the trigger it seemed to me that someone knocked up my hand, so that I missed. What really occurred was that I was so much of a coward as to snatch at any fribbling excuse to save my wretched life."

Watson moved farther into the room.

"Give me that revolver"

"Why?"

"Give it to me."

"You think—that I'm not to be trusted?"

"Never mind what I think. Be so good as to do what I ask you" The weapon was transferred from one to the other. Watson went on "Now I'll tell you what I think. I think that to all intents and purposes you're out of your mind, and practically a certifiable lunatic."

"I daresay you're right I—Gilbert, I hope you are"

The words were uttered with so poignant a sigh that the mere force of it seemed to shake the man's whole being.

"Is it really so bad as that?"

"It can hardly be worse—at least, I trust it couldn't. I'm done already, and if there's worse to come, what a broken wretch I shall be! But it's no use our talking. You expressed a wish, in anticipation, that I would thrust on you no confidence; yet if you only knew how I look for someone who

can help me, though it were ever so little—I don't want to go stark, staring mad—someone who's not a policeman!"

He pressed the palms of his hands against his forehead as if to cool his throbbing brow. Watson was moved by a sudden access of pity.

"Come, George, don't be a greater idiot than you can help. What I said I said without realising, apparently, how serious the position really was What's the real story of this business between you and your wife?"

"That's the trouble. I—I'm not quite sure. Let me explain. Do you mind my explaining?"

"Tell me everything, man; all that you can. I'm beginning to want to understand."

"It's just this. It sounds so simple, but it isn't —to me. My wife, Doris, has been the only woman in the world to me. I don't think I realised that there were women in the world before I met her, and we were married."

"Where did you meet her?"

"At a friend's house. A dance was given, and she played the dance music at the piano. I—I scraped an acquaintance with her, I had to. Gilbert, do you know what love at first sight is?"

Mr. Watson, thinking of the girl of the car, with the big eyes, and of his own absurdity, said nothing. It seemed that from his silence Mr. Blake drew an erroneous conclusion.

"I see you don't; it wasn't likely. You're not that kind of man"

Mr. Watson flinched; his friend was pressing him hard—especially when he continued:

"No doubt you, in common with a large majority of the world, are of opinion that that sort of stuff is the most fantastic moonshine—nothing in it, except—except what they would rather not understand."

"I'm not so sure of that. Don't you take too much for granted—where I'm concerned."

"It's very good of you to put it that way, Gilbert, but of course I know—you want to let me down lightly. I thought I was your kind once——"

"What do you mean by my kind?"

"Incapable of falling in love at sight with a woman hired out to play dances on the piano at parties; but when I saw her I knew better. I never thought of marrying till then, and—I wasn't a child; afterwards, I thought of nothing else. I told myself that if I didn't marry her there was nothing else worth doing. Odd, wasn't it? You wouldn't feel like that."

"I wish you wouldn't jump at conclusions, and keep on taking things for granted. I—I daresay I'm about as much of a man as you are."

"I got her address, I called on her, I spun a yarn. She had rooms over a sweet-shop in the King's Road, Chelsea; she paid twelve shillings a week for them, so you can imagine what they were like—and she found it hard enough to pay that. She told me her

story, or, rather, she told me a story—in outline, as it were. I'd have given a good deal to have been able to take her straight out of those lodgings on my first visit to her, to some place where folks are married. I've no doubt she saw what was in my mind, but she gave me no encouragement, on the contrary, she kept me at arm's length, and a little farther, in a way that showed she meant it."

"What was her name, at that time of day?"

"She told me that her name was Fergusson, that her mother had recently died, leaving her, unexpectedly, unprovided for, and that in consequence she found herself confronted by the necessity of earning her own living without having had any sort of preparation I found her engagements, of a kind, and pupils"

"Also, I suppose, of a kind. Did you ever pay any of their fees? Or the honorariums she received for her engagements?"

"I did. Gilbert, I couldn't let her starve—and she would have starved. I found out, from her landlady, that her rent was in arrears, and that it had grown quite a habit with her to be face to face with her last penny."

"And how long did that platonic state of affairs continue?"

"Gilbert, if you're going to sneer at me, I'll stop"

"I had no intention of sneering, I was merely wondering how long it was before you—told her things."

"I asked her to marry me within a fortnight of our first meeting, and she refused I asked her again and again and again; she continued to refuse"

"Assigning reasons?"

"Of a sort—the sort which, to my mind, were not worth a moment's consideration."

"To a man in your state of mind they wouldn't be."

"But I could see she was softening. It wasn't so much what she said or did, as something which was in her face, her eyes, her manner, when we were together. It's a queer story; at least, it seems queer to me, and a longish one—no doubt you think a foolish one."

"I wish you wouldn't be so cock-sure about what I think. I tell you again, I'm as much of a man as you."

"Then, one day, I verily believe before she meant it, she said 'Yes.' I fancy, in spite of the popular belief to the contrary, that women often do say that sort of thing before they mean to, under pressure When she said 'Yes' to me, she—she couldn't help it. Gilbert, it was the happiest day of our lives If you had seen her, if you had felt as I did! She wanted to back out afterwards She had all along maintained that the idea of marriage between us was absurd, taking her stand on the fact that I was a man of position and means, and that she was a nobody. I held that if it was an absurd idea it was owing to the

disparity in our ages, I was old enough to be her father nearly, a man shouldn't marry his daughter —I said that was what she felt."

"I suppose he shouldn't."

Mr. Watson was thinking of the girl with the eyes.

"It made her angry when I said that, she maintaining that age had nothing to do with it; that really she was as old as I was—older; that years didn't count—that other things counted. Once she told me that I was just the age at which a man ought to marry."

"Then why did she want to back out?"

"I've told you. In effect, because she wasn't worthy—which, of course, was balderdash. At last I succeeded in convincing her. We were married, quietly, at a church which was within a stone's throw of where she lodged"

George Blake paused. He began to move about the room. His friend eyed him with feelings which were a blend of amusement, amazement, and even envy. For the moment Blake had thrown off the burden which bore him down, in the joy of harking back, even in memory, to that halcyon time. He stood up straight, his head thrown back, the shadows gone from his face, in his eyes a light which made of him another man His tone had changed; there had come into his voice a triumphant strain—a note of rapture.

"I was, as I've said, and you know without my saying, not a child when I was married, but I'd never begun to live till then. I was born on my wedding day to a heritage of joy. Everybody who met me told me I'd become another man; and I had. I had become a man; I was only a husk before. For three years I walked in the Elysian fields, which grew more glorious every day; and when the baby came, that was the crown of all my joys—the top brick of the chimney. They say there never was a marriage in which there were not differences of opinion. Ours was one until the other day. There are those who pretend that continued, unbroken happiness, spells monotony, ours didn't—I'll swear to it. And more; I'll swear that ours wasn't a case of the French proverb either—of the one who loves and the other who permits. I was as dear to her, every whit, as she was dear to me; I'm sure of it. When a man has lived three years with his wife, he knows. I've had three good years, if the statistics are right as to the share of happiness which falls to each man, that is something."

Again Blake paused, and his friend was still Somehow, it seemed to Gilbert Watson that this man was on sacred ground, on which he himself had no right to trespass.

"Nothing happened, as I have told you, till the other day. You were coming. I told her about my meeting an old friend in Pall Mall, and how I should like you to come and see us. When she heard she

was as eager almost as I was—which makes what follows more inexplicable. This is Saturday; you came on Thursday; on Tuesday afternoon I had business in Midham, our local town. Returning, entering the bedroom, I found Doris on her knees beside the bed, crying. To say that I was surprised would be but faintly to express my feelings; she had never shed a tear since the day of our marriage. I'd only to look at her then to see that she had been crying as if her heart would break When I asked her what the trouble was, she put me off, I was conscious that she put me off; for the first time since our marriage she was keeping something from me, which I had a feeling that I ought to know. She told me that there was nothing the matter—that she had a headache, that she had been silly, that I was to pay no attention to her silliness. I knew better. I knew that something was the matter; I knew her too well not to be aware that, all at once, she was not as she was used to be. But I didn't press her, I thought that, in her own time, she would tell me what was wrong Queerly enough, Gilbert, when I found her on her knees, on the bed, close to her hands was an envelope—one of my own. I had written to you that morning to tell you that the train by which you proposed to come would suit us very well, and that you would be met; I had begun to address an envelope, then a great blob of ink had fallen on to it out of my fountain pen, and I addressed another.

The envelope which I had blotted was beside her on the bed, there was only one line on it: 'Gilbert Watson, Esq.'—then the blob had come, and I'd tried another. Another blot came out of the pen on to that, but it was only a small one, so I sent it—you remember?"

"I do, I have it still, with your note inside. I observed the blot, and, having some acquaintance with the vagaries of fountain pens, I guessed."

"I asked Doris, when it became clear that I was not to be told, then, what was the matter, how the envelope came to be where it was. She seemed surprised, and said, 'Was it there?' I pointed out to her that it was. She smiled—or tried to, because the attempt was a poor one, and said again, 'To whom were you supposed to be addressing that envelope?' 'Why, my dear child,' I replied, 'can't you see? There's the name written large enough, in spite of the blot—Gilbert Watson.' 'But who,' she asked, 'is Gilbert Watson?'"

Mr. Blake turned to his friend with what was very like a laugh

"Do you know, Gilbert, it sounds queer, but up to that moment I had never mentioned your name to Doris. I told her that you were an old friend, that we were at school together, and that sort of thing, but I had never once actually mentioned your name."

"Why should you? I suppose a man does some-

times tell his wife that he's asked a friend down without telling her who the friend is?"

"Exactly, that's how it was in your case All through Tuesday evening I could see that Doris wasn't herself at all, although she tried to be; and the more she tried the more she wasn't; and I don't think the consciousness that I saw she wasn't made things any better. I don't believe she slept at all that night When I woke up I found her crying, and we had something like a scene. While obviously something ailed her, she persisted in saying there was nothing, and that attitude on her part made me more uneasy than any other she could have taken up. We rose, on Wednesday morning, I won't say on bad terms, but, for the first time in our lives, not on good ones. Between us there had come what, I hoped, was but a tiny cloud of misunderstanding, but, Gilbert, I was afraid."

"It strikes me that, saving your presence, George, you were—do you mind my saying?—an ass."

"Not a bit, you can say what you please, only perhaps you'd better wait till I've finished before you say much if you wish to preserve a reputation for discernment."

"I'm only trying to consider, with a becoming judicial air, your own statement. How many husbands and wives rise every day of their lives not on the best of terms, and think nothing of it! They are

used to it, and use has taught them sense ; you weren't used to it, and—well, I'd rather you drew your own inference."

"I don't wish to accuse you of a desire to achieve cheap smartness ; you don't understand—that's all. I knew by instinct—and I knew, also, that this was a case in which instinct was an infallible guide—that things would never be again between Doris and me as they were."

"Nonsense! Sheer drivel! That's the first really foolish thing you've said. Husbands and wives can fall out a thousand times, and like each other all the better after the thousandth and first."

"Wait till I've finished, then crown me with the fool's cap and bells if you choose, and wear yourself an air of wisdom. It's so easy to be wise in another's case ; only wait until you've heard before you try to understand. The tragedy is coming."

CHAPTER VIII

HUSBAND AND—WIFE ?

"TRAGEDY—the tragedy—came on Wednesday evening; all day I had felt it in the air, coming. Indeed, all of Wednesday was tragic; it was so plain, to my perception, that the pleasant comedy, which had been playing for three dear years, was done. On a sudden, my wife had become another woman She shunned me, not, as you may suppose, because she had tired, but because—Gilbert, it's a fact, and not a mere expression of opinion—because she was afraid. Of what she was afraid I did not know—I could not even guess; but I knew she was And her fear infected me, it was a game of hiding, without any seeking, she hid herself from me and I from her. We did not even meet at meals She excused herself from lunch, and I dined alone. She had shut herself in her bedroom—our bedroom, she would not let me in When I was told that she would not appear at dinner I went upstairs to interview her, to learn her reason, and, if the thing were possible, to persuade her to come It proved impossible, for the simple reason that, as I have said, she would

not let me into the room; she kept me on the other side of the door, and said she would not open. I could not make a scene, hammer at the door and shout at her; still less could I break it down; so I dined alone. It was a cheerful meal."

Mr. Watson put a question

"Do you really wish me to understand that she would have nothing to say to you at all, without vouchsafing reasons? Really, Blake, your tale does seem to me to be amazing."

"You'll find it more amazing, perhaps, before I've done. While I was enjoying my dinner a note was brought to me from her. 'I wish to see you in my sitting-room after dinner; you will find me waiting for you.' That was all it said—there was neither beginning nor ending; it was as though she had served on me a summons to come and meet my doom."

"You do use the most exaggerated language; what a lurid meaning to read into so commonplace a message"

Mr. Blake paid no heed to the other's comment; he went steadily on, in a quiet, humdrum sort of voice, as if he were repeating a lesson which he had learnt by heart, visualising it as he went on

"I went up to her sitting-room and found her there, this is the room, her own particular room, her sitting-room—the Grey Room, we call it. Her personality so fills it, that to me she is in it all the

time; I believe that she is in it, though you cannot see her—I can see, and hear, and feel her everywhere. I am sure she is listening, so I must be careful of what I say."

Whether he meant his words to be understood in a literal sense, Gilbert Watson did not know, he did know that to have to listen to them filled him with a sense of eerie discomfort, he wished, cordially, that the other would use less fantastic language, the language of a normal man.

"She was sitting, when I came in, on that easy chair, the one near you, just as, in a sense, she is sitting on it now Can't you see her?"

With a hasty glance at the vacant seat Mr. Watson moved a foot or two away.

"May I ask you, Blake, not to talk like that? You may have reached the stage of seeing things, and be disposed to revel in it I haven't, and I don't want to—be so good as to bear that in mind. There is no one on the chair, and you know it, so—so don't talk as if there were"

"She wore a dress of a peculiar shade of blue, a dress in which I loved to see her; it was made in the fashion in which women are wearing their dresses now, made close to the figure, so that every outline shows Hers was a form which it was a delight for the eye to rest upon; the fashion became her supremely well. I thought, as she rose slowly and confronted me, that I had never seen her look so

beautiful. She is there now, and looks at me; if you put out your hand you can touch her."

"Thank you. I'd just as soon not touch her."

"I'd come into the room bent on doing great things. I told myself, as I came along, that at the moment of my entry, before she had a chance to speak, I would take her in my arms, with or without her will, and, with her head against my breast, patch up the strings which were broken. So soon as I actually entered I knew what a fool I had been; she was a woman with whom no man might take liberties, not excepting her own husband; it would have been as impossible for me to carry out my programme as to fly to the moon. She stood there with a *chevaux de frise* all round her, an impassable barrier—none the less impassable because impalpable. She radiates the same atmosphere now as she stands there looking at me; you're nearer to her than I should dare to come."

"See here, Blake, this isn't cricket; if you're going to talk ghosts like this I must beg to be excused. There's no one here—no one, I tell you; and for goodness' sake don't keep staring like that, as if you thought there were."

"My plan of campaign was at an end before I had struck a blow. Not only did I not dare go near her, my tongue was tied; there was that about her which held me still until she chose to speak. Gilbert, you cannot conceive how much I have loved her;

she was to me all in all; her mood my law. For three years our moods had moved together, and our laws. When I saw her there, and knew she was in one key and I in another, for the first time—for the first time, Gilbert, for the first time!—it was to me so monstrous that I was dumb. There was in her eyes a something which I had never seen in them before, which frightened me; she seemed to be searching my face as if it were that of a stranger. Then, all at once, without warning, she did a thing which frightened me still more. She took her rings off her finger—her wedding ring, her engagement ring, two other rings which I had given her—and she held them out to me in her upturned palm. 'Take them,' she said. 'Doris,' I cried, and then was still, in my bewilderment, not knowing what else to say. 'Take them,' she repeated. What seemed to me her unnatural coldness, her persistence, touched me on the raw; I became a little stern. 'Why should I take them?' I inquired. 'Because,' she replied, 'I am not your wife.'"

Blake stopped; his friend regarded him as if he himself were at a loss for words; he was realising each moment more clearly that the situation was even more difficult than he had supposed—so difficult that it hurt him also. Any words which he could utter could not but seem the sheerest bathos. He tried a question.

"Do you—do you think she meant it?"

"'Doris,' I asked her, 'are you mad?' 'No,' she answered, 'not any longer, I have been, but sanity has come again. I have been playing a part, and—it's ended Since I've no longer a part to play, I must be myself. I have lied to you from the first moment we met, now, for the first time, I am speaking the truth. When I first met you I was a married woman, though I told you I was single; my husband was not a nice man; I had no reason to be proud of him; and that was why I lied'"

Mr. Blake looked at his friend with a smile on his face that was worse than tears

"She spoke as quietly as I am speaking to you now. I let her speak; I could not have stopped her if I had tried—and I didn't try. 'When we first met I had no intention of deceiving you. You were a stranger; a man, to me, like other men; men have always honoured me with their attention; in that respect you were but one of many. I did not seek you, you sought me. I would have avoided you if I could, but I could not. I put my old life behind me for reasons of my own; I had resolved to begin a new one; that was my own affair—not anybody else's It did not seem to me, at the beginning, that it was yours By the time I had begun to realise that it might be it was too late; I was floundering in a sea of lies from which I could see no way out. I had not the courage to confess; I doubt if many women would have had. Think of

what I should have had to confess. I had told you that I was a maiden, fresh from my mother's keeping; and I wasn't—that was a grotesque lie. I had conveyed to you the impression that my knowledge of the world and of certain things in it was nil—that was a more grotesque lie than the other. I had told you nothing but lies; I couldn't confess to them all. You wouldn't have believed me if I had; I had that in my mind'"

Mr. Blake had been standing motionless, droning out his story in the same curiously unemotional monotone Now, with a gesture as of extreme dejection, he threw out his arms and laughed—not joyously.

"Gilbert! Gilbert! Isn't it a thing to laugh at when the house you thought of stone comes toppling down about your ears and you find that it was nothing but a house of cards, and you realise what a fool you've been Is anything more laughable than a fool, in the form of a man, at such a moment? I've been laughing at the recollection ever since."

Again he threw out his arms, emitting that curious cackling sound which apparently he meant for laughter; it made Gilbert Watson shiver to hear it.

"You understand I'm not pretending to give you every dot and every comma of what she said; but it's so printed on my brain that I'm prepared to wager that I'm so near to what she said that you might be listening to a record from a phonograph.

All the time I never spoke a word; I had enough to do to listen; it wanted assimilation, a tale like that."

Again that uncomfortable laughter.

"'There was another factor I had presently to consider,' she continued. I believe I'm giving you her very words—she was a highly educated woman, and she chose them with nice precision. 'Before very long I was in evident danger of falling in love with you.' She said it with quite a delicate grace. Nature had so fashioned her that she was incapable of saying a thing in any other way. 'Then you said you'd fallen in love with me.' You observe that she had it that I had merely said so; but she had the honesty to admit that there had been more than merely saying. 'Indeed, I knew you had fallen in love with me before you said so. It was the greatest compliment ever paid me, since yours was the sort of love which is as a crown of honour to any woman' You notice the pretty way she had of putting it? But she could do still better. 'I have said to myself that to me that sort of thing was at an end, that love and I were out for ever, I'm not sure, even now, if I am glad or sorry I was wrong. I have had the happiest time that a woman ever had; and if it's true, as someone has said, that one moment's perfect bliss is worth an eternity of hell, then, among all women, I am blessed, for many, many, many such moments have been mine. I've had three years—

three whole years—of perfect bliss.' There were tears in her voice, though not in her eyes. Gilbert, I was nearly moved to take her in my arms even then"

"I should have done it, and chanced the ducks"

"I fancy she saw what was in my mind, and power came from her which held me back. She continued 'I daresay the moralist would say it was impossible to know perfect bliss while living a lie; I've proved the contrary. I've been a living lie, yet been happy all the time. I should have continued happy had it not seemed to me that the lie could be no longer lived.' She paused, and for the first time her tone changed. She spoke a little falteringly, as if she found herself in a tight corner. 'George, I have told you so many lies that I don't know myself how many I have told, I can't ask you to believe anything I say, yet what I'm going to tell you now is true. When I met you first I was not a maiden, but I did think I was a widow; and I've kept on thinking it—perhaps on what may seem to you to be insufficient ground—until the other day. It was the discovery that I was not that finished it' Her voice shook so that I thought that she was actually going to cry."

Something in the speaker's manner roused the listener to what was very like a sudden show of anger.

"Blake, you're overdoing it! Curse it, man,

you must have known the woman was in agony! You're not the callous beast you seem to want to make out you are; it jars on me to hear you pretending."

"I am not, and was not, callous in the least degree. I was one great, open wound, as you'll presently learn; but I'll have to keep a tight hold on myself if I'm to get to the end of the story. When she said that for the first time I spoke; I asked her a question. 'Do you wish me to understand,' I said, 'that when I married you you were not only a wife, and no widow, but that your husband—your real husband—still lives?' She started and stared at me with something in her eyes which had not been there before, I fancy it was because the tone of my voice was strange to her."

"I think it's very probable. I'm bound to say, Blake, that according to your own showing so far she'd scored all the way, while I can't congratulate you on the figure which it seems you cut"

So far as any outward manifestation went, Gilbert Watson's interpolation went unnoticed.

"It was a moment or two before she answered, then it was with the tremor in her voice still more pronounced Her answer was contained in two words —I'm not likely to forget them 'He does.' 'He does still live?' I repeated my inquiry, I wanted to make sure I had heard aright. 'He does' Her answer was contained again in the same two words

We began a game of question and answer, if hers could be called answers 'What is his name?' 'What does it matter?' 'To you, or to me? I thought that at least it would have mattered to you, if only because I don't know by what name I ought to address you' You should have seen her quiver. 'To you I have no name.' 'Is that so? I didn't understand I quite perceive that a married lady is not compelled to tell her name to anyone, as you put it, you are entitled to lead your own life, and to keep your own counsel. Is it permitted to ask you where your husband lives?' 'That doesn't matter, either.' 'Is he acquainted with his wife's little adventure?' 'Nor, again, does that matter.' You should have seen the light in her eyes; they were beginning to blaze."

"I should say so My admiration for you is not growing as the tale proceeds"

"'It seems,' I said to her, 'that, from your point of view, it doesn't matter. I envy you your outlook. Still, the question remains, what do you propose to do?' 'I am in your hands' 'That's of course' You should have seen the way she held her head up, each second she was growing straighter and straighter"

"I shall grow what you call straighter and straighter if you don't take care I wonder she didn't throw a chair at your head, or something more portable"

"'I'll go to-night,' she said, 'at once, this moment, if you wish it.' 'That, again, is of course.' 'Shall I go?' 'With my clothes on your back?' Watson, a man never knows when the devil may enter into him, he entered into me then; never had I loved her more than I loved her then. None the less, for very little, I would have taken her by the throat and strangled her—because the devil was in me. I saw—I saw everything—which she had left unsaid. I saw that man wooing her, making love to her; I saw him put his arms about her, kiss her; I saw them at night together—at night, man, at night; my wife—with him. I saw—a hundred things besides, and they screamed at me I believe she saw murder in my eyes, because she stood so still, and shivered so. She was the most pitiful figure you ever saw. What would I not have given to have taken her in my arms! Yet—my fingers itched to strangle her."

There was that about the speaker which seemed to exasperate the listener

"Come, Blake, make an end of it; you're getting beyond my bearing. What did you say? What did you do to her? I don't want to know—you've known that all along; since we are where we are, I've got to know So out with it."

"That's the exquisite part of the jest, Gilbert. I did nothing, I scarcely said anything either—that is, I only said two or three things which I knew would sting her. And although every time she quivered I

shook, I could not have forgone the pleasure of torturing her for all the world I merely told her that it was out of the question that she should leave my house that night, that I would sleep upon it and let her know what I had decided in the morning, that my inclination, to be frank with her, was to wring her neck, and to advertise for her husband to come and fetch what was left of her—if, as I felt was scarcely likely, he wanted it. I told her candidly that it was quite possible I might act upon my inclination yet; she was to sleep, for that night, in the little room which had served me as dressing-room, while I would occupy the bed which we had shared together, and she was not to lock her door—I would take care she didn't, because in the night I might arrive at a final decision as to what was to be done with her, and wish to proceed, then and there, to do it. I didn't want any irritating barrier, in the shape of a locked door, to stand in the way of my executing my purpose."

"And you've told me what you said to her, what did she say to you? My word, if she had said what I should have liked her to!"

"She said that she would do precisely as I wished her, that I might kill her, if I chose, or let her live She would sleep where I wished her, and leave, as I desired, her door unlocked, if, in the middle of the night, I wished to send her packing, she would be ready and willing to be sent. Never a more patient

Griselda, a more dutiful, obedient wife. I believe she enjoyed her new *rôle*; that she loved me so, that she loved me to play towards her the bully, the tyrant, the torturer, that she was so conscious of her sins that she would have been willing to suffer what I chose, joyfully, by way of expiation; because she saw, in every cruel word, in every cruel action, that I loved her. If I hadn't I shouldn't have cared; I should have let the thing drift. She knew that it was because I did care that I couldn't—that I had to be a brute."

"You've your own way of putting things, Blake, but I fancy I've a sort of inkling of what you mean, and, in a way, I understand; but it isn't a pretty way."

"It all fell out as I had ordered. I had what had been our bedroom, she had the little one adjoining, and the communicating door was not only left unlocked, but wide open. I played quite a comedy with that communicating door. At the beginning it was closed; a fact which, when between the sheets, I resented. I got up and opened it, calling to her in the darkness. 'Are you in bed?' 'Yes.' There came the meekest little whisper back again, whether or not she was crying I was not sure—I did not stay to listen. I returned to bed—the door left open. Presently there came a sound; I knew that she was crying. I bore it for a time, then out I got again. I called out to her: 'How am I to sleep while you

disturb me with your crying?' I shut the door. Back again in bed, I wondered if she was crying still"

Mr. Blake stretched out his hands to his friend with a sudden, eager gesture.

"Oh, Gilbert! if you only knew how I longed to snatch her out of where she was and bear her back to me—the sweet, sweet body of her, the dear woman! It was the longing to which I was ashamed to yield which made me treat her as I did. I opened the door again, and called to her: 'Have you stopped that noise? Cry, if you like, cry your heart out—and your eyes, only be so good as to cry in silence.' There came no answer, only a little sound as if she were trying to choke back a sob which was forcing its way out of her throat; then stillness I was resolved that I would hear her voice, that I would drag something from her. 'Do you hear? I order you to be still Are you going to obey me?' 'Yes' There came the same meek whisper back again, and I knew that her heart was breaking Back I went to bed again, leaving the door, this time, open. And do you know, Gilbert, that I went to sleep? That was one of the strangest things on that strange night—I went to sleep, and in my sleep—she came to me."

"In fact? Or in imagination?"

"In fact, man, in very, very fact. I was asleep, and I began to dream of her—oh, yes, of her. I shall never dream of anything else but her to the end—

at least, I think not. I dreamed that she was with me, there, in bed; then I knew that she was not. You know what tricks dreams sometimes play with us. I knew where she was—in the next room; I saw her getting out of bed in the darkness, in her white gown in the darkness; I saw her, always in the darkness, steal towards the open doorway, and stand and listen; and, Gilbert, I saw her trembling. Then she came through the doorway, towards me, in the bed. At the bedside she stood again, and watched me; then bent over; then, yielding to a sudden rush of tenderness which was stronger than she was, she bent lower; and, Gilbert, I woke to find her with her arms about my neck."

CHAPTER IX

SOME PLAIN SPEAKING

ALL the semblance of almost unnatural calmness which had marked Mr. Blake's manner at the commencement of his story had gone, had given place to a still more unnatural agitation. All the muscles of his body seemed to be in movement, as though he were afflicted by some new variety of St Vitus's dance It seemed impossible for him to keep still; he paced restlessly to and fro as if in ceaseless movement he sought some species of relief. His voice was in keeping with the storm which raged within; it rose and fell, in sharp, broken discords.

"Gilbert, can't you see what an awakening that was for me? Can't you get into my skin and begin to understand? When I awoke, and realised it was she, for I don't know how long I tried to hide the fact that I was awake, it was so—so sweet, to have her there, to feel her dear, soft arms, her tender cheek, to be intoxicated by her breath; to know that I had but to fold my arms and she was mine—again, again, again! But I could no more have done it than I—I could have forced my way into heaven. So, as

long as I could, I continued to lie still, because I knew that when I should have to admit myself awake, I should drive her from me, and the dream would be done—the dear, dear dream."

Mr. Watson broke in with a heated interruption

"Man, why didn't you take her in your arms? I don't see why the devil you shouldn't have done"

Mr. Blake appeared to pay no heed.

"At last I—woke, and let her know it; I started up in bed and swore at her Yes, Gilbert, I swore at her, and I would have given my tongue to have been able to speak tenderly. I drove her from me; I asked her of what infamy she would be guilty next —she, another man's wife, at my bedside She did not retaliate or reproach me; she simply said that she felt that she had to come—that she could not stay away. So she had not stayed—God bless her! I sent her back to her room, but she was disobedient We had a scene; we spoke our minds to one another. She said—all in the darkness, mind, so that her voice came to me out of the shadows—such a quiet, gentle voice, in which there was such agony. 'You said that you could kill me, please do.' I laughed at her 'No high falutin', women of your sort aren't killed—they're thrown into the gutter' 'If you won't kill me, then I shall kill myself.' 'Do, by all means, only not in here You've dishonoured my sleeping chamber sufficiently—don't sully it more A suggestion—there is the lake; if you really do feel

like killing yourself, and are not telling another lie, you might do worse than try the fish-pond' 'I think I will.' 'Good, you'll find plenty of water, and you'll make food for the fishes. I presume you wouldn't propose to—to do it to-night?' 'No, not to-night' 'Then would you mind going back to your own room—at least, you may regard it as your own for to-night To-morrow, there's the fish-pond Are you going, or will it be necessary to ring the bell and have you shown?' 'I am going To-morrow, there's the fish-pond, as you say. I thank you for your suggestion. Do you remember how more than once I've pointed out to you how still the water in the fish-pond is? It should be a place in which one could sleep'"

Mr. Blake ceased; he stayed his restless pacing. Again the fashion of his countenance was changed; into his voice there came, as it were, tears of blood.

"She went back to her room, and there was no more sleep for me Gilbert, the lake, the lake—all the remainder of the night it haunted me, as I could not sleep. I knew, as surely as if the thing had been already done, that she would be as good as her word—that she would try the fish-pond, unless I forbade her I would not, I could not, I did not In the morning I rose early and went out, having seen and heard nothing of her; the fish-pond was with me all through the day It was a most curious form of possession I saw it in all its aspects, in all the seasons

of the year; and she was always on the surface, with the fishes about her As the day wore on I was nearly out of my mind with fear. I hurried home, meaning to—to forgive her, if she were still here, to take her back again, on any terms, at any cost—to ask her to forgive me When they told me I should find her in the nursery I had a sense of shock; I had not expected it would be like that. Still, I went upstairs, and she wasn't there, then, by degrees, I realised that what I expected had happened—that my premonitions had not been at fault. Gilbert, she's in the fish-pond, food for the fishes, and it was I who sent her there. I've murdered the woman who was all the world to me."

"I can allow, George, for all that you have gone through; you've had a pretty bad time, and although I'm not good at saying that sort of thing, I feel for you more—more than I can tell you. I don't think you've behaved, throughout, with the highest wisdom; but then I don't suppose that any of us would have done; I quite realise that there are times when wisdom, of any sort, goes by the board, and you've known one of them. All the same, it's better to be wise after the event than never, so do try to pull yourself together, and look at things with some remote approximation to common sense. You've no more grounds for saying that your wife——"

"She's not my wife."

"There, again, you're wrong, you're arguing

from what appear to me to be imperfect premises. But I'll leave that a moment for the other point. I was about to remark that you have no grounds for saying that she is in the lake, it's the merest, wildest surmise"

"You say so."

"Yes, and I say something else—I don't believe that anything of the sort which you imagine has happened to her at all. Would you like to take a sporting wager?"

"What is it?"

"I am willing to lay you, at short odds, five hundred pounds that the lady is proved to be alive within a month, and a thousand at evens that she is back again at The Beeches, as its mistress, inside a year."

"You'll lose your money."

"Well, it's a delicate subject on which to wager, so I'll not press it, but make a note of my words, and if I win, make a donation, say, to the local hospital instead of paying me. Blake, you're not so mad as you're trying to make yourself out to be. I can't believe it, you're not that kind of fool You don't seem to be in a nice position, but I've known men to be in worse, and come out on top Don't you think you take it too much for granted that your wife was to blame?"

"I tell you that she's not my wife."

"And I tell you that she is The institution of

marriage, at the present day, is in what I'll call a state of fluidity; the peoples of the world are treating it in a fashion which shows a tendency to make it more fluid still. What the exact definition of a wife will be in the next generation it would take a clever man to say. But I cannot conceive of a clean-minded, clear-sighted minister of any religion who could not concede that your wife has been a good wife, and a true wife, to you, from your own showing. Even now you have but the dimmest outlines of her story."

"Aren't there cases in which outlines are enough, in which it is better not to have them shaded?"

"This isn't one, I'll bet a trifle. To know all is to forgive all; you've heard that said, and I believe it. I know what kind of man you are; I know the kind of woman you'd care for, as you've cared for her. I hear good accounts of her from every side. I am sure that she was, in all respects, deserving of the love, admiration, and esteem of any decent man. Much more—mark my words, Blake, when you return to your right senses you'll recognise how sound they are—I'm convinced that when the whole of her story is known, she'll be shown not only to have been more sinned against than sinning, but never to have sinned at all I'm not going even to guess at the details of her story, but, if you like, I'll undertake to look closely into them, being persuaded, George, that when they have been made clear you'll love her better than ever."

"Another man's wife?"

"I don't believe she is another man's wife; I believe she is your wife, and yours only."

"She said she wasn't"

"When she said it you don't seem to have given her a chance of explaining what she meant, you don't seem to have given her a chance of any sort You seem to have forgotten, in an instant, all that you owed to her, all the happiness you have known with her, all that she had been and still was to you, as the mother of your child. I doubt if any judge and jury could be induced, by the most persuasive counsel, to record an opinion that you've behaved nicely, George"

"Do you think I don't know it? Do you think I shall ever forget it? You can safely leave me to my own punishment, I shall suffer all you think I ought to All the same, there are the facts, with which you can juggle, but can't be rid of. Her whole existence with me, as she herself put it, was a living lie. She lied at the beginning; she lied all through When I think of all the lies she must have told! And now you're suggesting that she lied even at the end"

"How do you make that out?"

"She said, as frankly, as distinctly, as succinctly, as it could be said, that her husband, her first husband, was still alive. You say you don't believe it. Isn't that charging her with still another lie?"

"You use words of unnecessary strength You seem to me to be like a cross-examining barrister, who wishes to tie a witness in a tangle from which there is no escape, so you fasten on each word she uttered, as a thing not to be explained away Now, I doubt if she ever meant her words to be treated with such brutality, especially do I doubt if she ever expected that your attitude towards her would be that of a cross-examining barrister. I think it is likely that she thought you would ask for an explanation, it seems only natural, seeing what you were to each other, that she should think so. If, as a person with a grain of judicial sense, to say nothing of affection, would have done, you'd asked for explanations, assuredly you would have got them; and then I think you would have found not only that things were not so black as she had painted them, but that her wild statement—that the man in question was still alive—was one which, transparently, would not bear sifting."

"I have always felt that it was easy to assume a judicial air when considering the woes of our friends, I never realised till now how odd it felt when one's friends assumed that attitude towards oneself."

CHAPTER X

SUNDAY MORNING

NEVER had a Sunday seemed to Gilbert Watson less like a day of rest than the one which followed. Disturbance began with the early morning After three sleepless nights in succession, he was not feeling at his best when the customary hour came for rising, He was late out of bed, things went wrong with his dressing; he had just cut himself with his razor, when there came a tapping at his bedroom door.

"Who's there?"

"Can I speak to you, sir, for one moment—at once?"

The voice was the voice of Cox, the butler. Mr Watson said something to himself which was not a blessing, with a towel he made a dab at the blood upon his cheek.

"I've just managed to gash myself with my razor, and I'm bleeding like a pig, but if you'll wait a second I'll come."

Presently he did go, standing at the open door with the towel pressed to his cheek Cox's countenance wore an air of unwonted gravity; instinct warned

Mr. Watson that he was about to be told something which he would rather not have heard.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir—very sorry indeed, but I hardly know what to do."

"What's up?"

"They've been dragging the fish-pond."

Something in Cox's tone caused a premonitory shiver to run down to Mr. Watson's toes.

"I thought Mr Blake said they were not to?"

"Quite so, sir; I understand that he did That's one reason why I don't know what to do—why I've come to you."

"What—what have they found? Not——"

"No, sir, not Mrs Blake. They found the body of a man"

"A man? What man?"

"Well, sir, that's it"

"What's it? What's the matter with you, man? What are you driving at? Why can't you speak plainly?"

"Frankly, Mr Watson, I don't quite like to; it seems to me to be a delicate position."

"You'd better come inside." Cox entered; the door was closed, the two men eyed each other, Watson more and more conscious that there was something in the other's manner which he disliked "Now, Cox, what is it? Who is this man you say they've found?"

"It's a man, Mr. Watson, with whom it appears

that Mr Blake had a violent argument yesterday morning, and whom Isaac Briggs said he heard fall into the pond, at the end of the argument"

"And who may Isaac Briggs be?"

"He's one of the men on the estate. It seems that he and Joe Sadler, and some other men, were going up with a cart to drag the lake, according to Mr Blake's instructions, when they met you, and you sent them back"

"I did—that's right; I told them they were not to interrupt Mr Blake as he was having some private conversation with a gentleman"

"They heard him having it It didn't seem to them to be very private, judging from the tone in which it was carried on. They say that after they had gone quite a distance they could still hear some of the language that was being used by Mr Blake. They waited with the cart round by the farm stables About half an hour afterwards Mr. Blake passed and saw them there, he called out to them that they could take the horse out of the cart, and were not to drag the lake—he had changed his mind. They thought at the time that he looked very strange—according to them, as if he'd been having a fight"

Mr Watson recalled the strangeness of Mr. Blake's appearance and manner as he had gone past him and entered the house, and the vigorous language which he had applied to Mr Halsey.

"Before then, Isaac Briggs had gone back into the forest to attend to some job about clearing some wood. When he saw Sadler again he asked him if he'd seen anything of the gentleman with whom Mr. Blake had been having a discussion. Sadler said he hadn't, he hadn't come down the path—he must have gone up Briggs replied that he had not done that; he had been working quite close to the path, and must have seen him. Then he told Sadler that he believed Mr. Blake had thrown him into the pond"

"Good gracious! What an accusation for the fellow to make!"

"Briggs is an old man—over sixty. I understand he's worked on the estate all his life, as his father did before him From what I've seen of him, and heard, I should say he was by way of being a character. He says that when he went up the path Mr. Blake and the gentleman were having a violent quarrel He could hear them still at it when he was working above; that there was a pause, that then they began again, and that then there was a cry and a splash. He had half a mind to come down and see what had happened, but considering that it was no business of his, he didn't. When Sadler told him that Mr Blake had passed, but that he had seen nothing of the gentleman, he jumped to his own conclusion He and Sadler live together in a cottage in the lane at the top of the estate. When

they were going home together yesterday evening they stopped by the lake, and they saw, floating on the water, a billycock hat The other men had been laughing at old Briggs because of his suspicion, the sight of the hat made him triumphant—he fetched some of the other men up to look at it This morning some of them got up early, and on their own account they dragged the pond, and found the body of the man with whom old Briggs declares he saw Mr Blake arguing"

"Old Briggs is an idiot"

"Possibly, sir, but that doesn't make it any the less awkward" There was a significance in Cox's glance at which Mr. Watson winced "I thought it might be better, sir, to tell you first; then you might use your discretion about telling Mr. Blake, especially as he's been a good deal upset already."

"Where is the man?"

"The body, sir, is in one of the coach-houses The whole place is in a stir, the talk is about nothing else. You see, sir, the police will have to be communicated with, they'll make inquiries of the men, and then—you understand?"

Mr Watson did understand—too well He sent Cox away, telling him that he would come down presently, and that nothing was to be done till then He gave him a parting injunction.

"Don't let those fellows gossip, if you can help

it. They will do more mischief than they've a notion of if someone doesn't stop them You warn them that the consequences will be serious for themselves if they don't look out."

Gilbert Watson, left alone, was disposed to curse his evil fortune , never, in his most pessimistic moments, had he supposed that things could turn out so badly as they seemed to be doing If he had only gone to Kamchatka instead of coming to The Beeches! What a very short distance a man can see in front of him! As he hurried through the remainder of his toilet, he tried to think what was best to be done. Cox's story had an ugly ring; he had said to himself when yesterday he had seen Blake entering the house that he just looked as if he had been throwing Halsey into the pond. If that was what he had done! That would be a pretty kettle of fish—with the tragedy of Mrs. Blake on top of it!

Cox had thought it better to tell him first, and then leave it to his discretion to tell the tale to Blake. He was an artful dodger, Cox was! He wished to goodness he had told Blake first, and left it to his discretion to pass the story on.

He descended in what was very far from being a good temper, to find Cox waiting for him in the hall. In a sense, the fellow seemed to take him in charge

"This way, sir."

The butler led the way to the hall door, plainly

taking it for granted that he would follow; and he did follow, though he would have liked to have shaken Cox for his air of conviction Outside the coach-house door half a dozen men were loitering.

"I thought I told you not to allow this kind of thing? Clear these fellows off"

"I don't see how that can be done, sir, without making a bad impression. These men are likely to be witnesses, there's no reason why you should wish to shut their mouths if there's nothing to conceal. Sending them off the premises, and forbidding them to talk, won't prevent the truth from getting about"

Mr. Watson saw the justice of this so clearly that he had no answer to make One of the men, who had evidently something to do with the stables, threw open the coach-house door Watson entered. Something was lying on the cement floor, under a sheet The sheet was removed. There was the man who had come to him yesterday from the other side of the hedge, and who had told him that his name was Edgar Halsey Little rivulets of water were trickling from his clothing, on which here and there were weeds One of the men, a sturdy fellow, with clear, sallow skin and black hair, volunteered a statement

"We found him close by the bank, in a bed of reeds He must have gone straight down into the

reeds, and somehow stuck there; the reeds are very thick, and sort of cling We had trouble in getting him up, he was stuck quite fast"

Another man—an old man—put in his word.

"It was I who found him first. I called out, 'There's something!' And there was—there was him"

"What's your name?" The question was Mr. Watson's.

"I'm Isaac Briggs, I am, I knew we should find him about there. I could tell yesterday, from the sound of the splash, that that was about the place"

"And what's your name?" This was to the black-haired man.

"Joe Sadler, sir I was with Isaac when we saw the hat. I'd been laughing at him before, but that set me thinking."

"Mr. Blake has been a good master to you men, hasn't he?"

There came a chorus of replies.

"He has, sir." "No mistake about that" "Never a better one." "If only all of them was like him!"

"Very well Then let me give you a word of advice and warning—keep your tongues between your teeth, and don't jump to rash conclusions I'm going up to speak to Mr Blake now I've no doubt that he will come straight down to you, if you'll wait

here, and then you'll find that he will have a word to say"

He left the men grouped about the stable door Cox went back with him towards the house, he said, as they were going.

"I hadn't a chance to warn you, sir, but I don't think Mr. Blake will come down just yet."

Again, to Mr Watson's ears, there was an unpleasant significance in the butler's tone.

"What are you driving at now, Cox? I'm beginning to have a sort of feeling that you're a bird of ill omen"

"I'm sorry for that, sir I was merely about to remark that under the circumstances I thought it might be better to call Mr. Blake myself. He wasn't in his bedroom, sir"

"I was with him till a pretty late hour this morning, and then I saw him to his bedroom myself."

"Indeed, sir. Did you see him into bed?"

"No; but I certainly understood from him that he was going to bed, straight away"

"I don't fancy he did, sir. There are no signs of his bed having been slept in"

"What the devil are you driving at? Speak out What's at the back of your head?"

The gentleman's tone was irascible, the servant's was courtesy itself Cox spoke with the emotionless calm of the well-bred servant.

"I should have told you, sir, before you spoke to the men, if I had anticipated what you were about to say, that Mr. Blake is not in his room, that he does not appear to have occupied his bed last night, and that, so far as I have been able to ascertain, he is not at present about the house. I meant nothing more."

CHAPTER XI

HER BROTHER

Cox was right. Blake's bed, as Mr. Watson presently saw for himself, that night had not been slept in. The room showed no signs of having been occupied at all A question broke from the lips of the much-tried guest.

"Are you sure he's not in the house?"

"I've not actually gone over the whole of it, but I don't think he is."

"What can have become of him?"

"He may have gone for an early morning walk"

"Is he in the habit of going for early morning walks?"

"I've been in his service going on for eight years, I've never known him do such a thing before."

They exchanged glances Watson's face was grave enough, he was almost sure that there was amusement on the butler's.

"Cox, what might you be laughing at?"

"Laughing, sir? I was not laughing. I was merely wondering when you would like to have your

breakfast. I believe that you will find that it is ready."

"I feel like breakfast. Do you know, Cox, that I came to this house with the confident expectation of having a good time?"

"Did you indeed, sir?"

"Yes, I did indeed, sir; and I bid fair to have one—a time and a half. What's to be done about that gentleman in the coach-house? You may imagine I'm posted up in the proper routine in these matters, but I'm not. Should I enjoy my breakfast—which you are so good as to say you believe is ready—wait for Mr. Blake to return from his early morning walk, and do nothing till he does return—or what?"

"I should recommend, sir, that in the first place you should have your breakfast"

"And then?"

"That depends. If Mr. Blake does not return shortly——"

"What do you call shortly?"

"That, again, depends. If he does not return, say, within an hour or two, the situation will become extremely delicate I believe that in these matters it is the duty of someone to communicate immediately with the police, in cases of delay awkward questions are apt to be asked Some of the men wished to communicate with the police there and then."

"You've a roundabout way of getting at a point,

but I fancy I see what you're driving at You think the police ought to be told?"

"I think they ought, sir, for everyone's sake"

"Then send someone to tell them, and I'll see what appetite I have for breakfast. If this Sunday goes on as it has begun it ought to be, so far as I'm concerned, a restful one."

If the thing were possible, the day went on from bad to worse. Mr. Watson was finishing a perfunctory meal, over which he loitered as long as he could, when he was informed that a gentleman wished to see him Before he could inquire who the gentleman was, where he was, or what he wanted, a stranger came striding into the room, in the shape of a young man whose appearance was as singular as it was striking He opened the conversation with a degree of informality which was distinctly startling

"What's this I'm told about Mr. Blake not being at home? Is it a lie, or has he levanted?"

Mr. Watson, who had risen from his chair, stared at the stranger with quite reasonable surprise, then, with his napkin, he wiped his lips—he had been in the act of finishing a cup of coffee when the gentleman entered.

"To whom," he asked, "have I the pleasure of speaking?"

"I'm Bryan Norton"

Norton? The name sounded familiar, he remembered the girl with the big eyes had said her

name was Norton—Olive Norton, of course. And also she had mentioned that she had a brother, who, in a sisterly way, she had hinted was as mad as a March hare It was to him that motor car belonged. If this was the brother, then, judging from appearances, Mr. Watson was inclined to think that she had hinted at what was no more than the truth; in a sort of sub-conscious way he was wondering to himself if there was anything in the air of those parts which bred lunatics This was a very handsome young man, fairly tall, willow-like in his slenderness, with a white face, with great big eyes, which were like his sister's and yet were not—even recalling the sister's Watson felt that the brother's were the most beautiful he had ever seen—lovely freaks, rather than commonplace eyes, something blazed out of them which might have been genius—or what is said to be akin.

He was dressed in a grey flannel suit, which seemed to consist only of coat and trousers; a blue flannel shirt was underneath; he wore no collar, but a weirdly tied purple necktie flamed at his throat. A soft, round, green felt hat, which he had not taken the trouble to remove, was pressed down on to the back of his long and luxuriant hair, which was almost of the colour of the hazel nut when the shell begins to harden. Whoever looked at him in that guise would certainly have looked at him twice Watson's first impression was that he had never

seen so beautiful, and yet so absurd, a masculine creature

"I think, Mr Norton, that I had the pleasure of meeting your sister yesterday morning, she was giving your car a spin."

"Oh, are you the man? She told me she'd met you You're staying here, aren't you? They asked me if I'd like to see Mr Watson, so I suppose that's you. Where's old Blake?"

Mr. Watson glanced round him at the servants.

"Do you mind, Mr. Norton, coming into the study?"

"What for? Is Blake there? I've come to see old Blake Did he tell you that I had a row with him on Thursday?"

"He has not mentioned that interesting fact, and I'm sorry to learn it I think, Mr. Norton, I would rather you came into the study."

"Of what are you afraid? Of the servants hearing? They'll hear fast enough, and all the world; you can't hide what's been doing here under a bushel. All the same, I'll come; you don't understand, but I'll soon make you."

There was a grimness in the young gentleman's tones which was almost ominous, Mr. Watson had become so used to the ominous that he had grown to look out for it. He was pretty sure that the young gentleman's presence there boded mischief to

Mr. Blake—more mischief; as they crossed the passage he told himself that if it were possible, that particular mischief should be nipped in the bud. He began what he hoped would result in nipping it as soon as they were in the other room.

"Before you speak, Mr. Norton, let me say a word I've the disadvantage of being older than you, so perhaps you'll yield me pride of place."

"Kick off, I'm willing."

It was rather a curious fashion in which to accede to Mr. Watson's proposition, but that gentleman had yet to learn to what an extent this youngster's fashions were peculiar. He tried to commence with an air of dignity which he was conscious he might find it difficult to carry through.

"I am Mr. Blake's friend, Mr Norton—one of his oldest, and I trust one of his dearest, friends, I must ask you to remember that in anything you may be about to say. Please say nothing to me which good manners would forbid you to say of a man to the man's best friend."

The young gentleman laughed; he took off his green felt hat and rumpled his hair. Watson remembered what his sister had said about his trick of running his fingers through his hair.

"You talk in the strain of the fine old English gentleman, Mr. Watson, 'All of the olden time' My congratulations. But it isn't you I want to talk to —it's Blake I'm after. I merely want to tell him

that if things are what they seem he's a confounded scoundrel—that's all."

"Oh! that's all. Then if Mr. Blake were here I shouldn't wonder if that were enough I don't know if you're serious, Mr Norton, in using such language, or if it is merely the ebulliency of youth"

"'Ebulliency' is good. When you begin the day like that, where do you get to before it goes? Watson, in all essentials I'm an Athenian Greek. I'm all for beauty."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Norton." He laid a stress upon the "Mr" "Am I to understand that you are speaking metaphorically?"

"Understand your grandmother. Not a bit of it. Where beauty is, I am—if I have to cross the world to get there. A beautiful woman is the noblest work of God, I fall in love with every one I meet—it's temperamental. What I am, I am—and that's what I am. Did you ever see anything more perfect than Mrs. Blake, regarded merely from the standpoint of beauty?"

"Unfortunately, I do not remember ever to have seen the lady to whom you refer so light-heartedly."

"Never seen her? When you're Blake's friend, and you're staying in the house? I say, Watson, had he murdered her, or whatever it is he has done to her, before you came into the house?"

"Your question, Mr Norton"—again the stress

upon the prefix—"is so remarkable a one that I hardly know how to treat it."

"My dear chap, he has done something to her—it's a dead sure thing. I told him on Thursday that I was in love with her——"

"You told him? By 'him,' do you mean Mr. Blake?"

"Who else? He was coming back from his rotten old court—he was riding; I was in the car. When I came up to him I said, 'Mr. Blake, we're neighbours, and that sort of thing I've been to your house and that sort of thing; you've been to my house and that sort of thing. All things considered, I think it's only right to tell you that I'm in love with your wife'"

"I presume you were in a humorous mood, as I take it you are now."

"That's what he thought, until I made it clear to him that I wasn't, then he lost his head, and got in a deuce of a paddy. If you'll believe me, Watson, he tried to hit me with his riding-whip. When he leaned over to get at me I started the car. His mare shied; when I looked round he was lying in the road I waited to see if it would be necessary to give him a lift; then up he got, on to the mare again, and off I went Naturally I didn't want to have any friction. Then when I heard of what they call Mrs Blake's disappearance, I began to put two and two together, and then I saw how the land lay."

"It did credit to your perspicacity."

"It was as plain as a pike-staff; he told her what I said to him—in consequence the feathers went flying, and he did what he did do, the brute! I made up my mind that I'd call him to account, and I've come to do it."

Mr. Watson regarded the youth as if he could not make him out at all; he said so in so many words

"I'm afraid, Mr Norton, that you are a little too profound for my shallow comprehension. It's very good of you to wish to call Mr Blake to account on such a matter, but unfortunately at the moment he doesn't happen to be in."

"I shouldn't wonder, you know, Watson, if he's done a bunk. I've had experience of this sort of thing, and I shouldn't at all wonder if I turn out to be right. I smell mystery. First she goes—the problem is, what becomes of her? Then he goes—the problem becomes more complicated what's become of him, and why?"

"I thought you said you had an affection for the lady"

"So I have, Watson; I told her husband so."

"The way in which you speak of her, young gentleman, hardly suggests what I understand by the word."

"If Blake had kept his temper I would have told him that my love for her was quite—shall I say, empyreal? I love a beautiful woman as I should

love a beautiful picture; and now that the picture's vanished, I'm intrigued as to what has become of it; and if I find that that bat of a Blake has damaged it, he'll smart."

"Possibly, Mr. Norton, you feel that you would rather say these things to Mr. Blake in person; you'd hardly like me to report them."

"As to that, you'll do as you like. Report away, old dear!"

The endearing epithet seemed rather to startle Mr. Watson; he stared at the youth with his most frigid glance, as if his intention were to freeze him, but Norton showed no sign that his temperature was lowered by so much as a fraction of a degree.

"Considering that our acquaintance is so short an one, don't you think that you're a trifle familiar?"

"My dear old man! I like you. When I like a man, I go quickly."

"I should imagine, Mr. Norton, that it is sometimes almost as well to be disliked by you."

"That's rather neat, Watson, heavy, in the style of the good old English gentleman, but the ironic intention's there. You're ruffled. I've a notion that I'm not the only provocation. However, pray suffer me to tender my apologies for my share. I'll stroll round, later I'll call again, and still later, if he isn't on view; if he's still invisible, it'll become a question of starting a hue-and-cry."

With a careless nod the young gentleman strode

out of the room, leaving Mr. Watson with very mingled feelings So this was her brother It was rather a blow. Whether the young rascal had been pulling his leg all the time, with unparalleled impudence, or whether there had been a grain of sense in the nonsense he had talked, and if so, where, were questions he did not find it easy to decide. He only knew that he had struck him as being the most impertinent person he had ever encountered, and that it was distinctly unfortunate that he should be her brother.

CHAPTER XII

HIS SISTER

As Mr. Watson was issuing from the study he met Cox, who was apparently about to enter. He put a question to the butler.

"Has that young gentleman gone?"

"He has left the house, sir. He mentioned that he proposed to take a stroll about the grounds."

"He mentioned that to you, did he? He's a nice young man. Is he an *habitué* of the house?"

"He's been here a good deal lately, sir, to see Mrs Blake."

"To see Mrs. Blake?"

"I believe she found him amusing, sir. I heard her tell Mr. Blake once that he was quite the drollest boy she had seen."

"I should imagine that she probably did find him droll. Cox, I've had about enough of this."

"A communication has been sent to the police."

"Has it? That's cheering And am I supposed to take up a sort of official position when they appear upon the scene? I'll be hanged if I will. If a man once allows himself to be dragged into that sort of

thing there's no knowing where it may end, I shall have my name in the newspapers if I'm not careful I'll be dashed if I stand it. There must be someone —some relative of Blake's, or someone, with whom you can communicate at once"

"I was about to make a suggestion of the kind, sir"

"Then for goodness' sake make it! Out with it, Cox."

"There is Miss Ormond, sir."

"And who's Miss Ormond?"

"Miss Ormond, sir, is a cousin of Mr. Blake's, who is, I believe, on terms of great intimacy with both Mr and Mrs Blake. She's rather a remarkable young lady, sir"

"Young, is she? That's a drawback"

"Not in her case, sir, I think you'll find She's a lady of large property, and she's managed it all herself in a way which I believe Mr. Blake very much admires. I know that he has the greatest confidence in her. Under the circumstances I don't think you could do better than communicate with her"

"Then communicate What are you going to say to her?"

"I should suggest sending a telegram over to Midham asking her to come down at once"

"That's right, and make the 'at once' as strong as you can"

"When she hears what has happened you will

find, sir, she will come immediately. Perhaps, sir, it would be as well to communicate also with Mr. Markham."

"And who's he?"

"Mr Markham is Mr Blake's legal adviser"

"That's the man. He'll assume all responsibility; it's his duty, and he'll be well paid for it. Send him a telegram a yard long which will bring him down, if possible, to-day."

"I don't fancy that Mr. Markham would come to-day, sir, under any circumstances; I think you'll find that Miss Ormond will be here first."

"I hope not; I can hardly go and leave a young woman in charge, and—Cox, you must see how it is"

"I think, sir, that I see what you mean, but I fancy you'll find that Miss Ormond will be much more likely to take things off your hands than Mr. Markham. If I may be allowed to say so, sir, Mr. Markham is a lawyer first, and a man afterwards, he will regard you from the strictly legal point of view, sir, as a most important witness, and therefore one not for a moment to be lost sight of"

"Great Scott! Cox, you don't mean it! I'm—I'm dashed if I don't go before he comes."

"He'll send someone to bring you back, sir, if you do, unless Miss Ormond arrives on the scene first, and takes all responsibility off your shoulders"

"Then—then the sooner you get her here, Cox,

the better; in fact, I don't think I should say anything to Markham till she is here."

"I'm inclined to think, sir, that I ought to communicate with Mr. Markham as well as with Miss Ormond, and at the same time, but I know both the parties, and you'll find the lady will be here first"

"If what you suggest of Markham is correct I most earnestly hope she will—and a good long first. If I can possibly help it, no lawyer shall drag me into the fuss that I see is coming. Who's that coming down the drive?"

"Sounds like a motor car, sir."

It was a motor car, and one with which Mr. Watson already was familiar. The sight of it made him conscious of a fresh sensation, it was the one he had seen in the lane, and in it was the same young woman She recognised him as he stood on the top of the steps to see her approach; she brought the car to a standstill in not quite such a workmanlike fashion as she might have done—she acknowledged as much

"I haven't yet acquired the art of bringing a car round properly, and that's a fact, but haven't I brought her along—the dust I left behind me! How are you? I hear you've been having quite a lively time Has that brother of mine been here?"

"He has"

Mr Watson's reply was brief, she seemed to read a meaning in its brevity.

"Has he been behaving like an idiot, and had a scene with Mr. Blake?"

He had assisted her out of the car, and they went into the house together.

"He hasn't, because Mr. Blake isn't here to have one with."

"Not here? What do you *mean*?"

She paused outside the study door.

"Come in, Miss Norton, please; I've just been having a little conversation with your brother; it will be such a comfort to have a little talk of another kind with you. Yesterday you were in a mess with the car, and I helped you out by turning the handle; now I'm in messes, as it seems to me—not one, but several, of all sorts and kinds; if you'd only give me a helping hand——"

He sighed—a sigh of genuine distress. In her big eyes there was what might have been sympathy, and was certainly a twinkle.

"It strikes me that trouble's in the air. I'm concerned about Bryan; he either has been, or is about to be, up to some mischief. The dance he led me last night! He simply raved; he talked about challenging Mr. Blake to a duel, and doing I don't know what to him if he wouldn't fight. Has anything been heard of Mrs. Blake?"

"Not a word. Miss Norton, I came to this house on a visit of pleasure, and I've come into an atmosphere of I'm afraid to think what"

"I'm wondering if that feather-headed brother of mine knows where she is—or, at any rate, what's become of her?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. I shouldn't be surprised at anything—that's the stage I'm approaching Miss Norton, I've only had one brief interview with your brother, but you must forgive my saying that he filled me with a feeling that he was rather a surprising person."

"That's how he affects everyone. You should live with him—then you might talk"

"Thank you! When I was a boy I used to be fond of fireworks, because you never could tell when they'd go off. I've got beyond that now, and I don't think I should care to live with a cracker, which you are always expecting to go bang, without ever being able to tell when."

She laughed, he thought what pretty lips and teeth she had, unwittingly the sight of her was doing him good

"He is something like a cracker, Bryan, and you never do know when he's going to bang, but he's a real good sort if you get him at the proper place and at the proper time If you really knew him, although he's such a frightful trial, you'd like him—I feel sure you would"

"Perhaps, if, as you put it, I really knew him, I might, but is he in the habit of telling husbands that he loves their wives?"

"I told you he was mad."

"You did."

"That's the form his madness takes His idea of a man's place in creation is going through the world loving lovely ladies, but really he means no more harm than you do."

"It's very nice of you to say so, because, in that case, he's the most harmless of human beings; but I assure you I didn't at all see myself in him."

She laughed again, he liked the sound of it, and the look of her, as she did it

"I hope you are not quite harmless, I think that every man ought to have a spice of mischief in him—sometimes an appreciable spice—I really do. I don't think I should like to live with an absolutely harmless person, that's going to the other extreme—it's not in the Norton blood"

His words were not an answer to hers.

"Would you mind doing that again?"

She stared at him.

"Doing what?"

"Miss Norton, I've been in this house—you don't know how many years it seems, I haven't seen a smile on anybody's face, and as for laughter—oh, dear! Please would you laugh again?"

"I always can do that" She proved it by doing it there and then "Do you know I'm awfully sorry for you, I couldn't live without laughter, I laugh at everything."

"I am rather that way myself, though you mightn't think it to look at me just now"

"I laugh even when I'm crying"

"I don't think I've got quite that far myself, I've been on the verge of tears more than once, but I certainly never felt less like laughing Miss Norton, I've had a really awful time, and I've a nice, agreeable, prophetic sort of feeling that there's a much worse one coming"

"What makes you say that?"

"I can't describe it—I'm not good at putting that sort of thing into words, but I sort of feel it in my bones. What's that? It sounds as if there were something fresh up now"

"Something does seem to be happening"

"It sounds as if they were all shouting together What did the gentleman say? He shouted loudly enough, but the dialect of these parts is strange to my ears."

"Let's go out and see They're coming to the house There seems to be quite a lot of people. Perhaps—perhaps——"

"Perhaps what?"

"Perhaps—anything I hope that Bryan has been up to none of his nonsense"

"My hope's more general I hope that no one's been up to anything What is that fellow shouting? Miss Norton, I'm convinced that there's some fresh trouble in store for me, and I'm such a coward that

rather than go out to learn what it is, I'd sooner sneak through the back door and make a dash for town."

"You're not a coward—I'm sure of it, you're not of the stuff of which cowards are made—I know better."

"Then, if you know better, I'm—I'm hanged if I am!"

They looked at each other, and they smiled at what each saw in the other's eyes.

Then they went out to see what was the matter.

CHAPTER XIII

STILL ANOTHER DISAPPEARANCE

CERTAINLY something unusual did seem to have happened, a curious clatter was disturbing what theoretically was the Sabbath morning calm; there were sounds of voices, as if several persons were trying to talk all together, and not in gentle tones As Miss Norton and Mr. Watson passed towards the front door, some maidservants came hurrying into the hall, as if all agog with curiosity to know what was doing. An excited group of ten or twelve people came bustling along the drive, composed apparently of indoor as well as outdoor servants, besides labourers belonging to the estate. The butler led the way. Mr. Watson addressed him

"Cox, what's the meaning of this disturbance? What are all these people making such a noise about?"

The butler seemed to have lost some of his customary calm, to be almost as moved as the others; he appeared to experience some difficulty in giving the required explanation.

"Well, sir, it's—its the most remarkable thing, but we can't find the body"

"Body? What body?"

"That of the gentleman who was drowned, sir, and whom the men found in the fish-pond."

Mr. Watson glanced at his companion; for some reasons he would just as soon that she should not have been present.

"I know. What about it? What's the meaning of all this fuss? What are all these men doing here, making—making such a noise?"

"As I said just now, sir, the body seems to have disappeared."

"What do you mean by disappeared?" He spoke to the girl "Hadn't you better go inside? I'll come to you in a minute or two."

But she declined.

"Thank you, but I want to know what's the matter just as much as you do. What does he mean by 'the gentleman they found in the fish-pond'?"

"It's all part of the unpleasantness of which I was speaking to you just now. The body of a man, a stranger, was found this morning in the lake. It seems he must have tumbled in and got drowned"

Cox went on

"You saw the body lying in the coach-house, did you not, sir?"

"I—I certainly did."

"It was in the coach-house when you came out?"

"That—that is the case."

"Well, sir, it's not there now."

"What do you mean by it is not there now? Where is it?"

"I communicated, as I told you, with the police at Midham, Inspector Hobden came over himself—this is Inspector Hobden."

A slight man, in uniform, who was standing by the butler's side, raised the white gloves he was carrying in his hand to his cap, saluting Mr Watson

"In consequence of a message which was brought to the station at Midham I came over at once with this man, Police Constable Ray." He jerked his thumb towards the tall, loose-limbed policeman who was standing just behind "I was informed that a man had been found in the fish-pond under suspicious circumstances—that's what the messenger said."

"Who was the messenger?"

The butler answered Mr Watson's question.

"Tom Martin, the under groom, who ought to have had sense enough to keep his tongue between his teeth till he was told to use it"

"That," observed the inspector, "is practically what I told him, I warned him to be careful of what he said, as any statement he made would be taken down. When we arrived we were taken at once to the coach-house to see the supposed body, and found there was nothing there. The place was empty,

there was nothing to show that anything had been there"

"The body was there when I left the coach-house, as Mr. Watson here will testify."

"Excuse me, Cox; that I can scarcely do I can't say when you were last in the coach-house, or who has been there since."

"I've not been there since I came away with you, you know the body was there then."

"But that's some time ago, fifty people may have been there in the interval"

"Or isn't it just possible that the supposed drowned man may have got up and walked away? He may not have been so far gone as you imagine, it is easy to make a mistake in a case of that sort. He may have afterwards recovered, and taken himself off."

This was the inspector. The suggestion was received with a chorus of protest. The first came from old Briggs

"Not so far gone as we thought, wasn't he? Did you ever hear tell of a man who was in the water all day and all night without being as far gone as ever he could be—eh, inspector? You answer me that."

The inspector tucked his thumbs into his belt and answered.

"How do you know he was in the water all day and all night?"

"Because I heard him tumble in yesterday, and pulled him out myself this morning"

"What you say places you in rather a serious position, my man. You heard him fall in yesterday and never tried to get him out until this morning—is that what you mean? Think it over."

"I said to these chaps here that I heard him, and they wouldn't believe me—and that's how it was; and when we saw his hat last night, then they had to believe, so this morning we went and looked for him—and we found him too. Not so far gone as we thought, wasn't he? Would he have been any farther gone if he'd been in a week?"

"I know a dead man when I see him, and he was dead enough—no mistake about that. There was no more life in him than in a drowned rat."

"No; that there wasn't. He could no more have got up and took himself away than if he'd been twelve feet under ground."

"If the inspector here had seen him he'd have known that for himself. The idea that there was any life left in him! I never did!"

The various comments came from different men. The inspector listened to them all with a stolid, official smile.

"I don't say anything, either one way or the other; only I was brought here to see a body, that of a person stated to have been drowned, and I haven't seen it—that's the only remark I have to make. T any explanation as to what has become of the bc in question it is my duty to listen, and I'm list

A sudden diversion of the subject was caused by the young lady, who was still standing by Mr Watson's side

"Where," she exclaimed, "is my motor car? I left it standing here, and—do you know?—I never noticed till this instant it was gone."

There was no motor to be seen then; the inspector explained its absence.

"You are Miss Norton, of Rogate?"

The young lady admitted that she was.

"We met your brother, Miss Norton—Mr Bryan Norton—as we were coming along. He was in a motor car, and was driving it. He stopped and spoke to us 'Inspector,' he asked, 'are you going to The Beeches?' I said that I was. 'Then probably you'll find my sister there—Miss Norton. Kindly give her her brother's compliments, and tell her that, as she borrowed her brother's car without asking his leave, he has borrowed it back again without asking her leave' Then he added, just as he was starting 'You might also point out to her, as from me, that it's a capital morning for a stroll, and that I'm of opinion that a walk may do her good' Then off he went, and he hadn't gone very far before the constable, who was sitting on the seat at the back of the cart, said to me, 'That young gentleman's driving a good deal faster than he ought'"

The young lady turned to Mr Watson, with her big eyes seeming bigger than ever.

"What—what a trick to play me! Isn't that just like a brother? Won't I pay him out for that! Now what am I to do—six miles from home?"

"Perhaps he's only having a joke at your expense, and in a few minutes he will be back again."

"Not he, I know him better; I shall have to walk. I've seen the last of him for to-day—and the car"

"Something," Mr. Watson assured her, "shall be arranged, only first let's get to the bottom of this queer business." He addressed himself to Cox and the official from Midham. "I don't know that this is any affair of mine, I'm only a visitor here, inspector. I know nothing about the matter except what Cox here has told me I take it that I'm not expected to find what someone has apparently mislaid."

"Can I have a word in private with you?"

The inspector's request made Mr Watson suddenly conscious of a slight internal shrinking

"I suppose you can, if you think it's necessary."

"I do think it's necessary."

"Very well, then, say your word at once and let's get it over. Come this way. Miss Norton, I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me, I will return to you so soon as the inspector lets me, then something shall be arranged for your return. You won't go till I am back?"

Their eyes met.

"I will certainly stay till Inspector Hobden sets you free again."

Mr. Watson led the way into the study, entering it for the third time that morning When they were in the inspector shut the door and stood with his back to it, there was something in his attitude which made Gilbert Watson conscious, not by any means for the first time that morning, of a curious sense of discomfort.

CHAPTER XIV

MR WATSON AND THE LAW

THE inspector's opening words did not tend to make Mr. Watson feel more at his ease. They were spoken with an air of sententious gravity, as if the inspector wished it to be understood that they were not uttered lightly.

" There appears to be a very serious state of things here at The Beeches, if the half of what I am told is true "

" If you're a wise man, inspector, you'll take it for granted that it isn't. You don't suppose that the half of what you hear is ever true ? I subtract about ninety per cent. from what I hear, at least."

Mr Watson tried to speak more lightly than he felt, the officer kept his glance fixed intently on him as if he were aware of it

" As a general rule, so do I. You'll be able to tell me if the half of what I'm told, in this instance, is true. Is it a fact that Mrs Blake disappeared from home some days ago, under suspicious circumstances ? "

Mr. Watson sighed, he perceived himself being

drawn into that association with the law which he had dreaded, he made still another effort to maintain his position of independence.

"I came on a few days' visit to this house; I am merely a passing visitor—that's all. Mr. Blake is my friend I know nothing of his wife—I've never even seen her. Their private affairs, as man and wife, may concern you in your official capacity, but they are no concern of mine, and I've no intention that they shall be. Mr. Blake's lawyer, and his nearest relative, have been communicated with, they will probably be here to-morrow. I must refer you to them"

"I'm afraid you don't quite realise your position, Mr. Watson."

Mr Watson did—he realised it only too well, but he was not prepared to admit as much, without a fight, to the inspector, who went on

"Here's a lady who disappears under what I am informed are suspicious circumstances, the whole country-side is talking of nothing else. Now I'm told that Mr. Blake didn't occupy his room last night, and that he has vanished. Now there's this affair of the man in the fish-pond; I'm told that Mr Blake finished up a quarrel with him yesterday by throwing him into the water."

"The man who told you that will be called to a strict account, be careful how you act upon tittle-tattle"

"I have not reached my present position needing to be told my duty by you, Mr Watson, there seems not to be the slightest doubt that that is what happened. The body is recovered this morning, and when I am sent for, what happens? When I arrive the body has vanished. What is the inevitable inference?"

"I draw no inference in matters which don't concern me"

"But the matter does concern you It looks as if the body had been removed either by Mr Blake himself or by someone in collusion with him. Do you know where Mr Blake is?"

"I do not, any more than you do"

"He has not said anything to you to lead you to suppose that he was going away? For instance, he did not to your knowledge last night try to commit suicide?"

Mr Watson thought of the revolver which had been discharged just as he was entering the room, and of Blake's story of how he had missed his aim

"Who on earth——"

Mr. Watson left the sentence incomplete, the inspector finished it for him—in his own fashion

"Told me? Was that what you were about to ask? In a house like this there are always people who tell, Mr. Watson, everything that happens is common talk I can see from your manner that Mr Blake did try to commit suicide, and that you know

it Why was he, a magistrate, and a gentleman of the highest position, guilty of so serious an offence as trying to take his own life, Mr. Watson ?"

That gentleman considered for some moments before he answered

"I shall decline to answer any questions having reference to the private affairs of my friend, George Blake, inspector, and I shall continue to decline"

"You'll do him an ill turn if you do; you could hardly do him a worse. Three allegations are already made against him by members of his own household that Mrs Blake has vanished under, to say the least of it, mysterious circumstances, and that her husband had a hand in her vanishing——"

"That I know to be a preposterous lie."

Mr. Watson could have bitten his tongue off; the instant he had spoken he saw the use which the other might make of his words, as he immediately did.

"You know that is a lie; then you do know something I don't wish to press you now; but, at the proper time, for your friend's sake you must tell me what that something is. Then it is stated that Mr. Blake was the cause of the stranger being found in the fish-pond, and that to escape the responsibility he has incurred he has taken certain steps which will require inquiry Here are the three allegations, they require either explanation or inquiry It seems to me that you, as Mr Blake's friend, can do him the best possible service by throwing all the light on the matter

that you possibly can. I may tell you that during the few moments in which I have been alone with you I have come to the conclusion that you have a very shrewd notion of what has happened to Mrs. Blake, and to Mr. Blake, and of the cause of difference between the stranger and that gentleman; and, also, that you have at least an inkling of what has become of the stranger's body. If that is the case I must warn you that you are incurring a serious responsibility by withholding any information you may have in your possession."

Mr Watson's countenance, as the inspector made this straightforward accusation, was a study of emotion which was altogether beyond his capacity of speech

"Of all the—of all the——"

He got so far, and then he stopped Presently he started on another tack, speaking in what he possibly intended to be an air of conscious dignity

"Inspector Hobden, when you said that you wished to speak a word to me I regret to say that I thought it possible that you might have it in your mind to say something impertinent, and—you've said it I'm not aware that your position entitles you to be impertinent to an inoffensive stranger. Be so good as to stand away from that door and let me pass."

"You decline to give me the information I ask for?"

"I decline to have anything to do with you of any sort or kind. Stand away from that door."

"I shall begin to suspect you of being in collusion with Mr. Blake."

The inspector actually raised his index finger and wagged it at Mr Watson, as if he were some refractory boy whom it was necessary to threaten with strong measures Gilbert Watson looked very much as if he would have liked to have struck the inspector.

"Stand away from that door, sir."

"Don't you speak to me like that, my man. I'm not sure that I should be doing my duty in letting you out of sight. If there hasn't been actual murder there's been serious mischief done here, if you haven't had an actual hand in it I believe you know who has, and all about it. It's your duty to give every possible assistance to the law, and I call upon you to do so. If you decline, then it becomes my duty not to lose sight of you."

Mr Watson was reduced almost to a state of spluttering

"Are you—are you—suggesting that I—I know what has become of that man's body?"

"I believe that you know who that man was, and what was his quarrel with Mr. Blake, and that, in the possession of that information, you are capable of putting two and two together, and at least making a pretty shrewd guess at what has happened, and I ask you to place me in possession of the information

you have, in order that I may be able to draw my own conclusions"

Mr. Watson sank on to a chair with what was very like a gasp.

"Look here, Inspector Hobden, if you want to lock me up, do."

"I want to do nothing of the kind"

"Then stand away from that door and let me out of the room, you're practically locking me up as it is If I take you by the scruff of your neck and remove you, you'll charge me with assaulting the police; but apparently you won't get away from that door till I do do something of the kind."

"Are you going to give me the information I require?"

"I've already told you that I decline to have anything to say to you, and I say it again."

"Very well, Mr Watson, you'll regret the attitude you're taking up—presently"

The inspector moved aside; with his own hands he opened the door Mr Watson passed out, firing a parting shot as he went

"I've had occasion to regret one or two things since I arrived at The Beeches, Inspector Hobden; but what I am likely to regret most is that a country policeman's ideas of his duty should be so peculiar"

CHAPTER XV

IN A DOG-CART

It was a fact—the body had gone. The mortal remains of Mr. Edgar Halsey had vanished into space, as Mrs Blake and her husband seemed to have done. It was a case of a third disappearance; the most mysterious of the three. How the body had gone, where it had gone, and when—these were puzzles of which it seemed there was no solution.

When Cox left the coach-house with Mr. Watson he had given orders that the door should be closed, that it was not to be opened again until the police appeared, and, in order that these things might be done, no one was to linger in its immediate neighbourhood So far as could be learned, these instructions had been carried out, in the spirit and the letter. The door had been shut, and kept shut; the men had been cleared right out of the yard, each was prepared to swear that he had not returned to it until the inspector came. When the dog-cart bearing the police arrived, the men had gathered round it, and with it, hanging about its wheels, had returned to the yard

Cox had seen the cart coming; it had halted at the front door; he had exchanged a word or two with the inspector, the whole cavalcade had approached the coach-house together. It was Cox's own hand which had opened the door, and held it for the inspector to enter; the inspector had entered, and on entering had exclaimed

"Haven't you brought me to the wrong place? There's nothing in here."

The butler, at his heels, had glanced about him in amazement, there certainly was nothing on the cement floor, where, so short a time before, there had been something under the shroud. The position, in its way, was comical, that the police should have been brought all that way to see a dead man, and that, after all, there should be no dead man to see.

What had become of him? Something must have become of him—it stood to reason, and yet—there was nothing whatever to show that anyone had been near that building since the door had been shut on the corpse inside

Even supposing it was shown that someone had been near the building, the position would not become much clearer. It was not such an easy thing for a man to carry a corpse, single handed, particularly out of a place like that, towards which someone's glance was always wandering To do such a thing in broad daylight, without being observed by someone!

Had it not been done each of those men there would have sworn it impossible.

But it had been done, and yet it did not seem possible. Even supposing the body had been borne unseen out of the coach-house, what had become of it then? It was absolutely certain that anyone bearing such a burden, even for an inconsiderable distance—say a dozen or twenty yards—was bound to be noticed, not by one person only, but probably by half a dozen. All those men had had nothing to do but hang about and watch, unless the bearer of that burden was invisible, he must have been seen.

And then, where could he have taken it? They looked everywhere, into every corner within range of a couple of hundred yards, where it could by any possibility be hidden; and into very many places where it could not be hidden. Not a trace of it; nothing to show that so gruesome an object had been in the neighbourhood. Gilbert Watson was bound to admit, to himself, when he heard the whole story, that it was an amazing position. Granting, even, that the inspector's suggestion was right, and that in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the man had not been actually dead, the explanation was still to seek as to what had become of him Admitting the hypothesis that in their absence, alone there in the coach-house, he had come to his senses, his first sensation, surely, would have been one of amazement to find

himself where he was He might have raised a hue-and-cry, probably would have done, he might have risen to his feet, gone to the door, continued to investigate, till he found someone to tell him where he was and how he came there. It was inconceivable that after so amazing a return from the portals of the grave his first impulse would be to sneak away unseen, even if, as was scarcely likely, at so awful a moment, he had the strength and the wit to do it

Going so far as to admit the inconceivable, that he had sneaked away, the question still remained as to how he had managed to go unseen. He must have presented a pitiable as well as a remarkable figure, in what direction could he have gone without escaping observation? Just as certainly as a man bearing a corpse would have been seen, he would have been seen, in whatever quarter he might have bent his footsteps

Looking at the puzzle from any point of view, it seemed to be insoluble, the man could not have been carried off—he could not have carried himself off, *ergo*, he must have been where they left him, in the coach-house, and he was not What even far-fetched alternative remained? They could think of none. Never, surely, a more puzzled set of men than those assembled that Sunday morning at The Beeches

Gilbert Watson left them to their bewilderment, and was only too glad to be able to do it. In the absence of the car which the owner had taken away

with him, a dog-cart was to bear Miss Norton to Rogate. Mr Watson had volunteered to drive it, and the lady had accepted his offer. Seated side by side behind the big brown horse, they went winding along the drive to the lodge gates, until, passing through they were on the open road and The Beeches was left behind

"My word! If only that place was left behind for good, and I hadn't to go back again!"

The words were uttered by Mr. Watson with so much earnestness that the girl glanced round to look at him. They had had a silent drive so far, neither seeming to be in a talkative mood, something seemed to weigh upon the girl as well as on the man.

"Yours has been an unfortunate visit."

The words were uttered by the girl with something in her manner which, in some odd way, jarred upon the man

"Unfortunate! Is that the word? I think not, the mischief is that not only am I not out of the wood, but that I'm getting deeper into it every moment. There has been only one extenuating circumstance, which, I own, is a large one—I've met you"

"Please don't talk like that, I don't like it."

This time, beyond a doubt, there was that in her tone which not only jarred but startled him—a coldness of which he had not thought her capable. It was as though she were reproving him, in effect, as if she had struck him a blow.

"I beg your pardon; I had no idea of offending you. It has not been your fault if there has been one oasis."

She was silent; he felt, without actually turning to see, that something had transformed her into quite a different girl from the one he had met with the car in the lane. They had gone some little distance before he spoke again.

"I'm afraid that something has happened to annoy you; I hope that the fault has not been mine."

"Mr. Watson, what do you suppose has happened to that man?"

The question took him by surprise; he had not supposed that her thoughts were moving in that direction.

"I can only tell you that I fancy it's all part of the same puzzle."

"How do you mean, part of the same puzzle?"

"First Mrs. Blake disappears, then Mr. Blake; now, the supposed dead man. But I hope you're not allowing that sort of thing to trouble you; it's my worry, in a way, but there's no earthly reason why you should make it yours."

"I'm troubled about my brother."

"Are you and he alone in the world?"

"Quite all alone; he is all I have, and I'm all he has. I sometimes wish that he had someone else—someone with more influence over him than I have—influence for good."

"How long have you two been alone?"

"Practically all our lives. My mother died when I was born, and my father died soon afterwards. I believe they loved each other very much, and that he did not care to stay when she had gone. I've been at school—of a kind—until about a year ago, then Bryan proposed that we should live together at Rogate, our old home He had been travelling about all over the world, doing, I believe, the maddest things, he was like a stranger to me; and so was Rogate It had been let for years and years Now the people were leaving it, and Bryan proposed that, as he put it, instead of letting it again, we should see what it would be like to live in. It has been rather a surprising experience, nice in some ways—indeed, delicious, but Bryan is the very queerest person I ever heard of. I daresay you thought yesterday that I was queer"

"I thought what, after the rap across the knuckles which you just now gave me, I should not venture to say."

She ignored his reference.

"I am queer—I know it All the Nortons have been queer; but I'm much queerer even than I was since I began to live with Bryan. I don't see how anyone could help it Now, I'm troubled about him again I feel sure that he's mixed up with what has been happening at The Beeches in some way I don't understand, and it frightens me You mustn't think

any the less of me because I say it, you've no idea how alone I am. You see, there's no one to whom I can say a thing."

It was a second or two before he answered, her words and manner touched him more than he would have cared to own, in a way of which he had not thought he was capable.

"If I can be of any use to you, Miss Norton, in any way whatever, although I am so entire a stranger, I trust you will command me."

"I don't think you can be of use, and just now you seem to have sufficient worries of your own"

"That's true, which is why I would welcome, with a sense of relief, the opportunity of sharing someone else's worry" Seeing that she was silent, he went on "Have you any special reason for supposing that your brother has, as you put it, had anything to do with what has been happening at The Beeches?"

"I can't quite tell you It isn't so much that I've any special reason, as that I know Bryan—I've begun to know him very well, and I feel it in the air"

In his turn the man was silent, conscious, all at once, of a most uncomfortable feeling that what she said was true—that this thing, and other things, were in the air. There was that in the atmosphere of The Beeches, and, indeed, of the country round about, which seemed to breed them. He would have

liked to turn the horse's head towards the station, and to put into execution his project of yesterday; to board the first train for town—with this difference, that he would have liked to have taken her with him. It was strange how the blood went coursing quicker through his veins at the bare notion of such companionship. The sense of shock, therefore, with which he heard the question which she presently asked him was more pronounced than it would have been had his thoughts not been running on such lines.

"Have you any children, Mr. Watson?"

He turned so suddenly in his seat that the brown horse, thinking it had been given a hint, began to quicken his pace.

"Children! Great Scott! What makes you ask me such a question?"

"I was only wondering."

"But what on earth makes you wonder a thing like that—all of a sudden too?"

The girl's manner was more than chilly—it was glacial. She sat bolt upright on her seat, and looked straight in front of her.

"You've been married several years. It seems only natural that you should have children. Haven't you any?"

"I've been married several years? What, in the name of all that's idiotic, do you mean? Steady there! Stop that! Do you think I want you to gallop?"

The last words were addressed to the horse, who, misunderstanding the way in which his driver was unconsciously tugging at the reins, appeared to think that it was Mr. Watson's desire that he should bolt. It took Mr. Watson some seconds to convince him that he was mistaken. Miss Norton observed the process of bringing the steed to a state of conviction with a reproachful mien

"Don't you think that if you were to pay more attention to your driving that you might not have so much occasion to find fault with the horse's behaviour? But perhaps you're not accustomed to drive"

"Not accustomed to drive?" Mr Watson laughed—not joyously. "I've driven every kind of beast and every kind of vehicle, including a pair of zebras from a board hung between two wheels."

"Perhaps you thought you were driving a zebra now"

"I thought nothing of the kind You—you say such things, and—and then I suppose I tug at the reins, as any man would, before I know it."

"What things do I say to cause any man to tug at the reins before he knew it? Are you suggesting that because of anything I said the horse nearly ran away? Because, if that is the case, if you'll let me get down at once you'll run no risk of further accident. Please stop."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

"I can't jump out while you're going at this pace"

"You stay where you are."

"Really, what a fury you're in. You must have a very bad temper."

"Then don't you rouse it."

"What have I said or done to make you go on like this? Of all the unreasonable people——!"

"Who told you I was married?"

"Who told me—what?"

"You heard perfectly well what I said. Who told you I was married? Or was it an invention of your own?"

"Was what an invention of my own—your being married? What next?"

"I ask you again, who told you I was married?"

"And in what a tone you do ask! Are you ashamed of being married? I'm sure I beg your pardon if you've any special reason for concealing the fact. I'd no intention of treading on your toes I believe you are sawing that poor horse's head off Look at the pace he is going What is the matter with you all at once?"

"I want a plain answer to a plain question Who told you I was married?"

"What does it matter? You answer my question Why don't you wish it to be known that you are married?"

"You know perfectly well that I am not married."

"I know! I never heard such a statement! I'm not in the least interested in the fact whether you are or are not married, so perhaps you'll change the subject Aren't the beeches backward this year? Generally, by this time, they all show signs of leaf."

"Hang the beeches!"

"By all means, if you like. In your present mood you will probably like to hang anything and everything. I never before saw a person lose his temper for absolutely no reason at all"

"The person who told you I was married told a lie, and when it was told to you, it was told with a purpose. If anyone did tell you such a lie, I think the least you can do is to tell me who it was"

"Aren't you married?"

"I'm not, any more than you are"

"Then you decidedly aren't married"

"What's more, I never in my life asked a woman to marry me, nor have I ever got within measurable distance of asking one. I never saw a woman I wanted to ask I never met a woman in the whole course of my life whom I would have made my wife on any conceivable conditions."

"Really, you do speak with emphasis, Mr. Watson. Do you want the whole country-side to hear you?"

"I don't care who hears me, so long as you do. Now be so good as to tell me who said I was married.

I've reason to believe there was something at the back of the mind of the person who said so, and I want to know who that person is."

"It was Mrs. Simmons"

"Who's Mrs. Simmons?"

"She's Mrs. Blake's maid"

"Mrs Blake's—— Oh, now I seem to understand When did she tell you?"

"Just now—that is, while you were talking to the inspector in the study."

"What induced her to make such a communication to you as that?"

"That's what I wondered myself—as if it would be the least bit interesting to me She asked me to go upstairs and look at baby, then when I went she asked me if I'd met you before I told her that I met you for the first time yesterday, and then I asked her why she asked She assumed quite an air of mystery, she screwed up her mouth, and looked at me out of the corners of her eyes, shook her head, and then told me that she only thought it right to warn me that you were not at all the kind of person with whom a young girl ought to have anything to do, that, in fact, you were quite an utterly dreadful kind of person When I asked her what she meant she said, among other things, that though you passed yourself off as a bachelor, you'd been married for years and years and years, and that you treated your wife in a way she'd rather not speak of, to a person

so young as I am. And then, as I'd had enough of her conversation, I went downstairs."

While the horse covered perhaps a couple of hundred yards Mr. Watson held his peace. She peeped at him, as she said Mrs. Simmons had done, out of the corners of her eyes, and she saw that he was sitting bolt upright, with a look upon his face which made it look sterner than she had ever thought it could have looked; and she rather thought the look became him

CHAPTER XVI

ROGATE

MR WATSON spoke just as the lady was beginning to ask herself if he was ever going to speak.

"Miss Norton, why that woman made such a statement to you is one of the mysteries among which I seem to have got entangled since I came to The Beeches. There's not a scintilla of truth in anything she said, and why she said it passes my comprehension Did she dare to tell you that she had ever seen me before?"

"She didn't exactly say that, but she more than hinted that she knew a great deal about you—too much, in fact"

"The—the—the dear old thing! Miss Norton, I doubt if the creature has ever heard of me before in the whole course of her life. She certainly knows nothing at all about me When I get back to The Beeches I'll call her to account—and to something like an account"

"Do you seriously mean to tell me that you are not married, and never have been?"

"I repeat that I'm no more married than you are."

"But why should she tell me such a falsehood—me, of all people; as if it mattered to me in the very least if you had a dozen wives?"

"I don't know why she told you, Miss Norton, but before very long I'll do my best to find out. I tell you again, I've never so much as asked a woman to be my wife, or even hinted that I loved her."

"I should think there are not many men of your age who are able to say that, with truth."

"What's the matter with my age? I'm not a centenarian"

"There's nothing the matter with your age, that I know of, except that I should say you're at the age at which a man is at his very best"

Something in the young woman's tone actually brought the blood to Gilbert Watson's cheeks—he blushed, and was so conscious that she was alive to the fact that, biting his lip, he refused to look anywhere but straight ahead He was conscious, also, in a not altogether unpleasant fashion, that the young woman was enjoying his confusion

"Isn't it a delightful day to be driving? After all, there is something to be said for a dog-cart, one does escape the dust"

Her tone was primness itself; he would have liked to shake her.

"I'm glad you can find something to say in favour of a dog-cart."

An interval of silence, then the maid again

"By the way, it has suddenly occurred to me that you've had no lunch, and it must be past your usual time. Perhaps that's one reason."

"For what?"

"Haven't I read somewhere that when men get hungry they easily get cross?"

More silence; then, with a grim smile, he said, *à propos* of one could not see quite what:

"I'll forgive you"

She seemed to understand, her manner was meekness itself.

"Thank you. If you take the next turning to the right you'll be at Rogate in five minutes, they may be able to give you some luncheon there."

When he brought the horse to a standstill in front of a low-built, red-brick, creeper-covered rambling old house, they seemed to be on much better terms than they had been when they started She sprang to the ground, giving vent, as she did so, to a whistle which cleft the air A man came hastening round the side of the house

"Griffith, take the cart round to the stable and give the horse a feed, Mr Watson is going to stay for lunch Now, Mr Watson, out you come, Griffith will see that everything is all right."

They were half-way through the meal, and Mr.

Watson was telling himself, once more, that his coming to The Beeches was not all worry, when the lady's brother came into the room, and the atmosphere was changed. So far it had been quite a comfortable meal, both the lady and the gentleman had been laughing. The lady reminded him of what he had said about having heard no laughter since his coming, and seemingly out of sheer high spirits they both laughed at the reminder. Mr. Bryan Norton appeared in the doorway while they were still in the enjoyment of some little joke, which he would probably have thought was of the very smallest kind He glanced first at his sister

"So you have come home—without the car. I hope the exercise did you good," when he glanced at Mr. Watson. "On my honour, this is something more than a surprise. I had not imagined that you would have honoured our poor roof with your presence so soon after our little conversation of this morning."

It was not easy to determine if the young gentleman meant to be impertinent, or if he had his own peculiar fashion of welcoming a stranger. His sister looked at him with an expression which seemed to mingle reproof with defiance

"Mr. Watson was so good as to drive me home, and added to his goodness by staying to lunch."

"I am sure, my dear Olive, that Mr Watson is all goodness—he's that kind of man. Is there any-

thing left to eat? I rather think that I'm feeling hungry."

He joined them at table, tasting this, that, and the other—rejecting them all in turn. Plainly the young gentleman's appetite was fastidious; he admitted as much.

"Why is it, I wonder, that one's food is so seldom in touch with one's mood? I know I could eat something if there were something here that I could eat, but there seems to be nothing."

"Bryan, you're the most difficult person to cater for I ever met."

"The more reason why you, or the cook, or whoever attends to that kind of thing, should be a person of imagination and brain. All the world over I've observed that where food's concerned it's imagination which is most to seek; in this house especially that's the case. Why can't someone in the kitchen invent some new way of cooking some new thing?"

Miss Norton was sarcastic.

"Nothing could be simpler, you've only to mention it to Dawson and it will be done at once. Dawson is our present cook, Mr. Watson; she's been here three weeks, and she's leaving at the end of the month. They've so little of what Bryan calls imagination that all our cooks do that. When Dawson's gone, Bryan is going to discover for himself the kind of cook he has in his mind's eye"

"When I was last year in Naples, there was a man

who used to cook in a little restaurant who had an imagination, if you like; an imagination which was almost divine. I'll wire to them to send him over"

"He'll be sure to come—by telegram, if the thing is possible—he'll be in such a hurry I suppose you won't enter into such unimaginative details as the wages which you mean to pay him? I presume you'll pay him anything he asks."

"Anything he asks, until his imagination begins to fail, and I have to drop him into the nearest pond. By the bye, Mr. Watson, what's all this fuss at The Beeches about a gentleman in the fish-pond? It sounds too funny. They find a man who's had a ducking, they take it for granted he's drowned, and directly they turn their backs he gets up and walks away. You've a queer lot down there."

Mr Watson made no answer; it was a subject he did not wish to discuss with anyone, particularly with this young gentleman It was his sister who replied to him, with sisterly frankness.

"Bryan, what awful drivel you do talk, talking about a ducking. Do you call it a ducking when a man has been in the water for nearly four-and-twenty hours?"

He, on his side, was fraternal.

"It's you who talk the sort of stuff to which you refer, my sweetest Olive. If girls only had no tongues some people might be gulled into believing that they had sense." He addressed his further observation to

the visitor "It so happens, Mr. Watson, that the person who was supposed to have been drowned is a gentleman with whom I have some acquaintance."

This time Mr Watson seemed startled into speech, he looked at the youth as if he doubted that he was in earnest His question suggested as much.

"May I ask, Mr Norton, what is the name of the gentleman to whom you refer?"

"Halsey, Watson—Edgar Halsey, to give him his full style and title To show you what rot my sister talks about four-and-twenty hours, I may mention that I saw him myself when I walked down to The Beeches this morning, and he wasn't in the fish-pond then"

"Are you—are you joking?"

"I never joke—the gods forbid! Life is too serious a thing"

"Bryan, what nonsense you do talk! You're so in the habit of what I suppose you mean to be joking that I never know whether to believe a word you say. You know perfectly well that you never saw that wretched man this morning"

"Watson, did you ever have a sister?"

"Unfortunately, no, I was the only child of my mother"

"Lucky woman—never to have tried to match you! Lucky man—never to have had to bear with such a thing as that!" The young gentleman waved his hand towards the young woman at the head of

the table. "Listen to me, Watson, and pay no heed to that. There's likely to be mischief done if everyone's a fool I tell you that I saw Halsey with my own eyes as I walked down to The Beeches this morning and, what's more, I believe I've seen him since"

"What do you mean by since?"

"As I came along in the car just now I believe I saw Halsey crossing a field towards old Franklin's farm."

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Norton?"

"Of course he doesn't! You don't know him as well as I do, he's simply trying to amuse himself at your expense."

The young gentleman leaned over the table towards his guest.

"Let me tell you, Watson, that in spite of what she says, I mean every word I said. There's some confounded silliness afloat. From what I've seen of him, I shouldn't judge Halsey to be the nicest of men. I've a notion that he has a pull on Blake, out of which he hopes to make money. He had one row with him yesterday morning—at least, so Halsey told me."

"Do you mean to say that you spoke to Halsey after he had had that scene with Blake yesterday morning at the fish-pond?"

"Certainly I do—directly afterwards. He was in the deuce of a stew—said Blake had called him all sorts of names, and threatened all sorts of things. He talked about what he'd do to Blake before he'd

done with him; I shouldn't be surprised if Blake had another row with him this morning, chucked him in the fish-pond, and left him there. Directly afterwards those idiots at The Beeches came along and pulled him out, and took it for granted he was drowned, which he was very far from being. That's my theory. If Blake has hooked it, I think it's very likely that it's because he thought that he'd added the drowning of Halsey to his other crimes"

Watson was in a state of unmistakable agitation Even the young lady seemed hardly to know what to make of her brother, she eyed him with a very singular expression

"Yours is the most extraordinary story, Mr. Norton. You must excuse me if I say that to me it seems to be almost incredible. I've seen more than one drowned man in my time, there is an appearance about a man when he has been some time in the water which, once seen, is not likely to be mistaken again. I had a good look at the body of that man as it lay there on the floor, and from what I saw I should have been prepared to swear that he had probably been at least six or seven hours in the water. What is more, other men who were present, who had also seen something of the drowned, were prepared to swear the same; indeed, I've no doubt that they would be willing to go into the witness-box at this moment and swear that the man was as dead as he very well could be."

"They'd perjure themselves if they did it, perjury, conscious or unconscious, is the most common of offences"

"How do you explain the hat which the two men, Briggs and Sadler, say they saw last evening floating on the water?"

"Easily I rather fancy that there was the beginning of a shindy between Blake and Halsey yesterday morning, in the course of which Halsey's hat either fell off or was knocked off, and no doubt tumbled into the water. When I met him he was hatless—I know that; but, unfortunately, as it turns out, my sense of fine feeling prevented my asking him what had become of his hat. However, it's no good our continuing the discussion, since you are here, Watson, let me show you round the place; it's a curiosity shop in its way There are one or two things worth seeing"

The young gentleman rose from the table, the visitor followed suit, glancing at the lady. Miss Norton seemed to see interrogation in his glance, which she readily answered

"You go with him, Mr. Watson, only I hope you've a sense of humour, it will come in handy when you're listening to some of the tales he will spin."

"That's right, sweet sister, inform the stranger within your gates that your brother is like unto them who say the things which are not."

Bryan Norton quitted the room Gilbert Watson

said to the girl during the moment they were left alone .

" Is it possible that what your brother says about that wretched man Halsey can be true, and that everyone was mistaken and he wasn't drowned ? "

" Although he's my brother, I don't know myself if he's speaking the truth, but I'll tell you this much —I believe he knows more, much more, about—about everything, than he chooses to say."

Mr. Norton's voice came towards them through the door.

" Watson, are you coming ? "

CHAPTER XVII

A PERSISTENT ACCUSER

To his disappointment, during the first part of his exploration of the Rogate sights, Mr. Norton acted as his sole personal conductor, and some of the stories he told did need a little digestion The visitor remembered what Miss Norton had said as he listened, and, as he recollected, he smiled. On one occasion the young gentleman caught the smile.

There was a picture gallery at Rogate, and in the gallery there were pictures, portraits, for the most part, of bygone family worthies. The stories the present representative of the Nortons told of some of these were a trifle surprising There was one, also a Bryan, who had lived somewhere in the eighteenth century, and whose adventures among women emulated those of Don Juan It was when he was telling about this remarkable person that the young gentleman caught Mr Watson's smile.

"You're thinking of what my sister said"

"I'm bound to admit that I was"

"She warned you that I should tell you lies, she may be right or she may be wrong. I'm not so sure;

she's always sure; I seldom am. With Pilate, I'm inclined to ask what truth is—just where a lie begins and where it ends"

The young gentleman's judicial fashion of discussing his own peculiarities in this respect took Mr. Watson rather aback, but he was destined to be taken still more aback before many moments were gone. Young Norton, taking a cigarette out of a case, proceeded to light it at the stump of another he was smoking. His manner continued to be judicial, though, from his listener's point of view, his words grew more and more surprising.

"For instance, to illustrate what I mean by personal application, I'm rather stuck to know where, in some tales I've been told about you, the lie begins and ends."

"Who's been telling you tales about me?"

"Your wife"

Mr. Watson might almost be said to have jumped; he certainly did seem to have raised his whole body an inch or two from the floor. The young gentleman had succeeded in taking him aback with a vengeance—or so it seemed.

"My——? In case I did not hear correctly, would you mind, Mr. Norton, repeating what you said?"

The young gentleman was regarding him with what was very like a fixed stare, as if those strange eyes of his had the quality of never blinking

"I said that the stories to which I refer were told me by your wife."

"Then, if that is what you said, it is well that I have the sense of humour, of which your sister spoke, so well developed"

"You are cryptic, my dear man. What has your sense of humour to do with your wife, unless you regard her as a humorous asset? She doesn't seem to have noticed much that was humorous about you, unless you intended her to regard you as a sort of laughing fiend"

Mr. Watson had flushed when he was alone in the dog-cart with Miss Norton, now he was positively rubicund He seemed to be gasping, as if he found it difficult to breathe When he spoke it was his intention, perhaps, to be dignified, but his manner suggested angry pomposity rather than anything else.

"I found you a little trying this morning, Mr Norton. I had to ask myself if you, a perfect stranger, as you were then——"

"And as I am now, practically"

"Had come down to The Beeches with the deliberate intention of insulting me."

"Not a bit of it, Watson. Why should I?"

"And now, in your own house, you say to me a thing which—which I am not only unable to understand, but which I resent all the more because it is said to me under circumstances which render it difficult for me to mark, adequately, my resentment."

"Hear—hear! Very well said! Watson, you've the making of a public speaker. But why this thusness? I haven't even got to the beginning of my tale. Afterwards, throw the furniture about if you like, but have some reason for throwing it"

"If I thought that you were deliberately laughing at me, although I'm in your house, and you're my host, I—I warn you I should resort to measures."

"Good gracious, Watson, don't do that! I protest that never in my life was I farther from laughing at you, or anyone."

"Then what the devil do you mean by more than insinuating that I've a wife?"

"Come, Watson! There's no one listening, except the pictured people, and they won't hear. If you can help it, don't play that off on me I've no doubt that you're a gay bachelor in your own estimation, and you can behave as such, as far as I'm concerned; but, between ourselves, when we are alone together, as we are now, it won't do. You see, Watson, I know your wife."

Mr Watson glared rather than stared at the speaker, as if he felt that one or other of them could not be in complete possession of his senses, and as if he were not sure which of them it was.

"Mr Norton, do you wish me to regard you as a mountebank, or merely as a congenital romancer?"

"'Congenital romancer' sounds rather neat, you do this sort of thing so well, Watson, that I

cannot but suspect that you have had plenty of practice"

"What sort of thing?"

"The injured and indignant air sort of thing. But what is the use of practising it on me after what I have just now told you?"

Gilbert Watson gasped. This young man's cool persistence was making him think that it must be he himself who had lost his senses.

"You seem to have been frequenting some singular society lately, Mr. Norton."

"I've been in your wife's society a good deal lately, Mr Watson It seems rather severe to call that singular."

"If you will introduce me to my wife I'll give you ten thousand pounds I'll sign a bond to that effect this instant if you like"

"You will?"

In the intensity with which the young man continued to regard him there was a quality which was beyond Watson's comprehension.

"Watson, I see that you're a poker player"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you can put up so excellent a bluff."

"You call that a bluff? Take me somewhere where there's a sheet of paper, and I'll set down in black and white the promise I've just now made you; I'll increase the sum to be paid you to fifty thousand pounds! My signature to the promise shall be wit-

nessed by your sister and by anybody else about the place you choose, and everything shall be done that you can suggest to make it a legal, a valid, and a binding document."

"My good Mr Watson, I could take you to your wife, and win your money, inside—we'll say an hour or two, if I liked"

"That's a lie."

The young man bit his lip, as if to check himself from a hasty retort

"I've purposely refrained from that sort of language. Can't you manage to do the same?"

"Let me put the matter in a different way. As I told your sister not long ago——"

"Have you been speaking about this sort of thing to Olive?"

"She informed me that a woman at The Beeches, named Simmons, a servant, had told her that I was a married man. Was the same woman your informant?"

"She was not My informant was your wife herself"

"I told your sister that what the woman had said to her was a lie It is a lie, an utter lie! When I get within reach of the woman I'll call her to an account for it which she will not soon forget. I am not married, Mr Norton I never have been married If, after that, you do not accept my statement, what am I to say to you?"

"On my word, if you put it like that, I really don't know. You see, I should accept your statement if, as I have said, I didn't know your wife; but, I repeat, I do. In the face of that fact, what am I to say to your statement? Let's put it that way"

"Somewhere there is some extraordinary misunderstanding. Confront me with the woman of whom you speak."

"For reasons into which I am not prepared to enter that happens to be impossible; and I can't help feeling that it is that which bucks you up, you know it."

"Then how am I to prove, as I'm perfectly prepared to do, that the assertion you make is absolutely baseless? That the woman to whom you refer, whether or no she's an adventuress——"

"Don't you talk like that, Watson! I'll not have it! She is in all respects the finest creature I ever met, and one of the most wronged women on God's earth"

The lad's manner—he was scarcely more than a lad—was all at once oddly stern, in spite of himself Mr Watson was impressed by it. That the lad was serious it seemed impossible to doubt.

"If she's all you say she is, Mr. Norton, then there is all the more reason why you should place me in immediate communication with her. You've only to bring us face to face to dispel the delusion under which you seem to be labouring Your injured

woman whose only sin is that, in an evil hour for her, she was so unhappy as ever to have met you. That's no threat, Watson ; it's simply a little candid speaking. And I do hope that you're still in a condition of mind and body in which you are able to appreciate candour, even in the young."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT FRIGHTENED THE BROWN HORSE

ALMOST before Gilbert Watson knew it, the young gentleman had left the gallery, and he was alone. In the exchange of words he had been distinctly worsted.

"As I'm a sinner," he exclaimed, when he clearly realised that the glib-tongued and quick-footed youth had gone, "I shall begin to think that I'm in a world of topsy-turvy, and that I don't know who I am. I've felt it threatening ever since I set foot in this delightful part of the country, but this—this does cap everything. What's that disease which they say makes people forget who they are, all about themselves, and what they've done? I'm beginning to wonder if by any chance I've got it, and if that's the explanation. I'm not conscious of anything having happened to me, but then I suppose people who have it aren't. I seem to remember every single thing I've done since my very earliest days; but perhaps that's part of the complaint, and I've got my recollections all wrong"

Miss Norton, entering the gallery, glanced round her in surprise.

"Why, I thought Bryan was here."

Mr. Watson addressed himself to her.

"Miss Norton, you've seen something of me yesterday and again to-day; have you seen anything in my manner which would lead you to suppose that I am suffering from aphasia?"

"Aphasia? Whatever's that?"

"Never mind, I don't want to enter into medical details. Have you seen anything in my manner which would lead you to suppose that I'm mentally deficient?"

"Why, nothing to speak of"

"Nothing to speak of! Is it so bad as that? Then, perhaps, I have got it"

"Got what?"

"Whatever it is Your brother, who really is a remarkable young man——"

"I told you he was"

"Will have, what you wanted to have, that I'm a married man"

"No!"

"Yes Only he differs in this respect from you that when I positively assured him, as I assured you, that I'm not, he persisted in his statement that I am"

"Who can have told him?"

"That's it! He says that my wife told him—my wife herself, and that's what makes me think that I must have got it—that obscure disease of the brain,

whatever it is; because I'm prepared to swear that my wife can't have told him, for the—as it seems to me—perfectly sufficient reason that I have no wife Now, Miss Norton, the disease I'm thinking of is one in which the sufferer forgets his own history. I hope I need not tell you how anxious I am to prove that I'm not a sufferer, and therefore I shall take it more kindly than you've any notion of if you will let me tell you my history, as I remember it, right from the very beginning Then, if at any point there seems to be a vacuum, perhaps that is where my wife came in; but if I can account, as I believe I can, for every single year since I came into the world, that ought to prove that the wife with whom your brother persists in crediting me must be non-existent. Don't you think it ought?"

The girl laughed

"It seems to be the funniest thing Can Bryan, in one of his mad moods, have been having a joke at your expense?"

"He didn't seem to be mad—that's the trouble He seemed to be so sane that I was driven to wonder if it was I who was mad It's a frightful thing to ask, but would you mind my boring you? If the boredom becomes unbearable you'll only have to drop a hint, and I promise you I'll stop Have you any engagement? Because, if I have to begin at the very beginning, it may take some time."

"Need you begin quite at the very beginning?"

"I'll pass lightly over the earliest years, if you'll kindly take it for granted that I couldn't have been married before I was, say, twelve."

"I think that even Bryan might concede that much, and I'm sure I will. But, do you know, it's perfectly lovely out of doors, it's a sin to stay in a stuffy old house on an afternoon like this. Suppose I show you round the grounds? With that eventful history of yours you might beguile the way"

"That's a capital idea, then, when the story gets beyond bearing point, you'll only have to say 'Left wheel,' and yourself bear to the right, and I shall know that a hint has been dropped."

On that understanding they went out together into the open air, and the lady showed him round the grounds, and with his story he beguiled the way. The process of showing him round the grounds assumed what might be called a variegated form It involved a good deal of sitting down; there can be no doubt that on a fine afternoon in April, when there is an inviting spot under the shade of a friendly tree, it is as well at times not scornfully to pass it by They found a spot of that kind—and did not pass it by, not for quite a considerable time And Gilbert Watson's story beguiled that time, without the lady showing the slightest appearance of being bored There is more than one instance on record of a lady listening attentively to a tale of moving events by flood and field, and Olive Norton proved to be another one.

She was the most sympathetic of listeners, Gilbert Watson could hardly have had a better one, though the probability is that he told his tale, on the whole, not ill For if there be any story which a man can tell well, it is surely that of his own doings, to a lady who lends an attentive ear, when he and she are alone together, in a pleasant, wooded place, when the sun is shining, and the air is warm, and to him there seems to be that light in the lady's eyes which is the most enchanting light that a man shall ever see It is at such times that the world seems young, as it did to them, until Miss Norton awoke with a start to the fact that it was older than she thought it was.

"Why, whatever is the time? It's getting quite dusk"

The gentleman looked at his watch

"Great Cæsar's ghost! It's nearly eight"

"And we've had no tea! And we're supposed to dine at half-past seven."

"Supposed to dine at half-past seven?"

"Luckily, not on Sundays, or it would be a pretty state of things. On Sundays we're supposed to have a scratch sort of meal somewhere about eight, no one's particular about the exact time; it's on the table, and when we want it we go and have it. But how long can we have been here?"

Her cheeks were all glowing as she asked the question; something seemed to be dancing from her eyes to his.

"It seems to me that we have been here while the world has changed."

She laughed, her cheeks glowed still more.

"We must have been here for hours and hours."

"How I must have bored you!"

"Bored me? You know you've done nothing of the kind. I never knew the time pass so quickly before"

"Have I proved to you that the probabilities are that I'm not suffering from that obscure disease of the brain?"

She rose to her feet; they had been reclining on the ground, which, luckily, was as dry as it could be. She held herself very straight, with something buoyant in her poise which, somehow, suggested happiness, and she laughed down at him, and the sound of her laughing was a sound it was good to hear

"You've proved all sorts of things, you've proved—I don't know what you haven't proved!" She laughed again, seeming to be all laughter. "You've proved, among other things, what I thought no one ever could prove to me—that an afternoon can pass before it seems to have really begun. And to think that I should have forgotten all about tea! They'll suppose that I've been careering all over the country. Now you must come and have supper—that's what we call what stands for dinner on Sunday."

They supped together—this time without interruption—in the low-pitched dining-room, with its

panelled walls and raftered ceiling. The lamps had to be lighted before they had finished—they still used oil lamps at Rogate—and in the soft glow of the lamplight came to a close what, in spite of obvious drawbacks, had been to both of them a delightful day. Gilbert Watson said to her, during the farewell in the hall, before he went out to the dog-cart:

"They say that there is one day in every man's life which he never forgets. This has been mine, I shall never forget it, even though ultimately I do succumb to that obscure disease of the brain."

He drove off into the darkness, leaving her standing in a little glow of lamplight on the steps; she had come out to see the last of him. He looked round more than once, while the lights of the house were still in sight, and each time she was there; and each time he saw her, even more and more dimly in the distance, his heart seemed to give a jump. When she had passed altogether from sight it seemed that the shadows had suddenly deepened, and that the way was unnaturally dark.

As a matter of fact, the night was dark Although the stars shone in the sky, there was no moon, and every now and then he drove into a haze which made it difficult to see even a foot in front of him

Fortunately, he had that traveller's gift which seems to develop in a man who has been a wanderer over the face of the earth—the bump of locality. He had only been once over that road before, and then

it was in the daylight; but to such a point had he unconsciously trained his faculty of observation, that by a sort of instinct he picked out, even in the darkness, the way he had come.

None the less, on more than one occasion he had his moments of hesitation, in which, when he came to cross roads, he was not certain which one to take. On one of these occasions he had been more in doubt than ever; even when he had taken the road he had decided to follow his doubt remained—he was not at all sure that he had taken the right one It was late for that part of the world, and the country seemed deserted. Once or twice he had passed stragglers, but now, for some distance, he had met no one. He was beginning to think that if before long he did not encounter someone who would be able to give him information about the lay of the land, it might be wiser to let the brown horse retrace his steps to that cross road, and there examine the sign-post more closely than he had done. It would be better to go back half a mile, even if the road was the right one, than go on a mile or two farther, to find that it was the wrong one after all He had almost decided to return when the brown horse shied, so unexpectedly that the driver was almost jerked from his seat

"Steady there—steady! What's wrong?"

Something was wrong, or the brown horse seemed to think there was. He could not correctly be said to be standing still, for he was fidgeting about on the

road in a fashion which Mr. Watson was perfectly well aware meant nerves, but though his driver did his best to soothe him with voice and rein, he refused to advance. Gilbert Watson leant forward as far as he could in the endeavour to make out what it was that the creature regarded as an obstacle. That there was something seemed pretty plain, he felt sure, from the experience he had had of him, that the brown horse was too sensible a beast to balk at nothing. Watson spoke to him as he might have done to a timid fellow human

"Well, my lad, what's there? I see nothing What do you see? Surely you're not making all this fuss because of the shadow of that tree which lies across the road! You've passed scores like it before. Gently—gently! Don't start dancing; and don't try getting up on your hind legs, this is not a circus, lad What's the matter with the horse? He seems to be looking at something on the side of the road there. What the dickens does he see?"

"Perhaps, sir, your horse sees me"

The utterance was so unexpected that Gilbert Watson started as well as the horse; that intelligent beast seemed so taken by surprise that he stood almost straight up on his hind legs It was with some difficulty that Watson induced him to return to a more normal position. Having succeeded in doing that, he addressed the owner of the voice, who still remained unseen

"What do you mean by frightening my horse? Where are you? Stand out in the road so that I can see you"

"With pleasure, if you wish me to."

On one side, as is frequently the case in the country, there was a stretch of grass between the road and the hedge. Mr Watson could dimly make out that just in front of the horse a man was rising from this grassy stretch, in a leisurely fashion which the brown horse resented, so fidgety was he that Mr Watson had all he could do to induce him to behave at all. Gilbert Watson spoke to the still practically invisible stranger with scant ceremony.

"Confound you, sir! Hold my horse's head, can't you? You seem to have frightened him half out of his wits. What do you mean by lying on the roadside like that?"

"Can't I lie on the roadside if it pleases me? Can't anyone? Am I to be debarred from taking my ease because a tailor happens to be coming along in a dog-cart, fumbling at the reins?"

Something in the voice struck Mr. Watson as being curiously familiar—so familiar that he started again, and when he started the brown horse started too Yet for the life of him he could not think when and where he had heard it last. At that point the road was lined on one side by towering trees, so that the other side was all in shadow. Just then that shadow was so nearly impenetrable that he could still

see scarcely anything of the owner of the voice As to his identity, he was yet literally wholly in the dark.

"Who are you? I know your voice"

"I doubt it. I certainly don't know yours Let me have a look at you; let me see who it is who disturbs a gentleman who is taking his rest by the roadside."

The speaker's figure advanced, Watson seemed to recognise it even in the dimness. As he came nearer the sense of recognition became an eerie one. Presently he saw him clearly; his face seemed to shine up at him through the half light.

"Halsey!"

The name broke from him with a sort of startled cry The other appeared to be equally startled

"Blake's friend! The fellow who is stopping at The Beeches! What—what brings you here at this hour of the night?"

He did not wait for an answer, as if deeming discretion to be the better part of valour, he moved quickly back into the darkness, towards the side of the road There was a sound as if he were scrambling through a hedge, then of hurrying feet, as if he had taken to his heels, and was running across the field upon the right It seemed plain that the meeting was as unexpected by him as by Watson, that he desired to make it as brief as possible Watson called after him.

"Halsey—Halsey! Come back, man! Why are

you running away? Good God, man, you've nothing to fear from me! Halsey!"

The last repetition of the name was a great shout, which seemed to go crashing through the darkness. There could be no doubt whatever that it had been heard; but there came no answer—nothing to show that the fugitive had the slightest intention of returning. Even the sound of hurrying feet died away; all was still.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ACCOMPLICE AFTER THE FACT

GILBERT WATSON was in a quandary, not for the first time lately; but he was inclined to think that this was the most difficult of all the positions in which he had recently been placed What was he to do? It was of the first importance that he should thresh matters out with this man—this Halsey, yet how was he to do it? He would have to chase him. To do that it was necessary that he should leave the dog-cart. Would the horse stand still? He doubted it, though he tied him to a tree. He was conscious all the time that the creature was quivering Probably if he were to lay his hand upon his coat he would find that he was in a sweat of fear, if left alone, that fear might take a very disastrous shape for the dog-cart Was he sure of catching the fugitive if he started in pursuit? That, again, to say the least, was doubtful. Clearly he had pretty strong reasons for wishing to avoid an explanation, he had a good start—possibly had some acquaintance with the country, was directing his course to some point where he knew he should find cover. If such was the case,

Gilbert Watson stood a very poor chance of reaching it first.

He would have to let the fellow go, if only for the sufficient reason that he could not help it. And yet—what a complication might ensue!

Young Norton's story must have been true, here was proof of it None the less, he was sure that nothing would convince them at The Beeches of its truth, short of the kind of proof he himself had had. If he produced Edgar Halsey alive, then they might believe that their eyes had played them a trick beyond all credence, and that he was not dead, failing his production of Edgar Halsey as a living man, they might believe that he had been tricked, they would laugh to scorn the idea that they had He gave the brown horse a hint to start, that intelligent animal, as if conscious that the cause of his fear had gone, responded willingly, swinging along at a good round pace. His doubts as to whether they were going the right road recurred to Watson—to be dismissed, he would have to chance it. Then he had an idea. They could scarcely be very far from The Beeches, the brown horse probably knew the way perfectly well to his own stable; if left to himself he would doubtless go there. Watson, relaxing his hold of the reins, suffered them to droop on the creature's back. It instantly seemed clear that that was a hint which the animal quite understood, in fancy Watson could see him prick up his ears, as, with head well

up, he started off at best speed towards home and supper.

Nor was his driver's confidence in him misplaced, round corners which were almost unseen by Watson, he went with an assurance which spoke volumes. In an unexpectedly short space of time he drew up before what Watson perceived to be the entrance to The Beeches. The gates were closed. Both the lodge-keeper and his wife came out to open them, the man checked him as, with a curt "Thank you," he was about to pass on

"Excuse me, sir, but have you seen anything?"

"Seen anything? Of what?"

"Of the master, or the mistress, or of the party as was drowned? As you'd been away so long I thought perhaps you might have There's the police up at the house."

"Police? What for?"

The man's voice dropped

"They're after the master. It seems that they found something up there, and I'm afraid there's going to be trouble—worse trouble even than there has been—much worse. I thought if you'd seen or heard anything, you might have been able to give the master a hint."

The man's wife interposed.

"Now the baby's gone"

"The baby?"

"It appears that Mrs Simmons has gone; looks

like as if she'd taken the baby with her He was in his bassinet asleep all right enough this afternoon, the little dear, then when the nurse went back to see if he was still asleep, he was gone. Mrs. Simmons, she'd taken him with her—to his mother."

Her husband commented on his wife's words.

"That's what you say. It isn't what the police say They say"—the man dropped his voice again—"that his mother's been murdered"

His wife was indignant.

"Don't talk such stuff to me! And don't go telling me such tales, because I won't listen to them. Murdered indeed! I never knew such stupids as them police can be Who's murdered her, I should like to know?"

"The police"—the lodge-keeper's voice sank lower still—"they seem to think that the master's done it."

"Robert! Don't you dare to say such a thing in my hearing, because I won't have it. I've known George Blake ever since he was a baby himself, and if anybody says he'd go for to do a thing like that, they don't know anything at all about it. Only let them say it in my hearing—I'll learn them! And as for you, Robert Arnold, I'll leave your house rather than I'll hear you say it"

"Who is saying it? It's the police—not me; and we won't make things any better for Mr Bl as far as I can see, by pretending that it isn't"

Gilbert Watson drove on, leaving husband and wife engaged in what bade fair to be a heated argument. What was the state of things which prevailed at The Beeches was presently made clear when, approaching the house, a uniformed figure, advancing, held up a monitory hand.

"Who's there? Stop, please."

Mr Watson drew up, not a little surprised.

"I've orders to stop anyone going or coming to the house What's your name, sir, please?"

A voice came from the hall door, which had been suddenly thrown open—a voice which Mr Watson recognised as belonging to Inspector Hobden.

"That's all right, Brazier, I know this gentleman. You can let him pass."

"Upon my word, Inspector Hobden," as, having descended from the dog-cart, he entered the hall, "it's very good of you to let me pass. What do you mean by instructing one of your men to stop me?"

"If you'll step in here I'll explain."

The inspector waved his hand towards the study, in which they had had their little passage of arms in the morning.

"Why the deuce should I step in there? I consider that you've been guilty of gross impertinence in instructing one of your men to stop me as I'm driving up to my friend's house."

"It's no use your taking on that tone with me,

Mr. Watson, because I have to do my duty, and I'm not responsible to you for the way in which I do it. You'd better step into the study."

Mr. Watson stepped; not because he wished, but because he could not see how he could very well avoid it. Something of that feeling of paralysis which comes over some men when they find themselves confronted by the police was already coming over Gilbert Watson—a sensation that he was about to deal, as it were, with a dead wall The impression was heightened by the stolidity of the inspector's manner during the interview which followed.

"Since I saw you this morning, Mr. Watson, the position of affairs in this house has entirely changed, they have assumed an aspect the gravity of which I can hardly exaggerate."

"Is that so, inspector? And what's turned up now?"

"One thing which has what you call 'turned up' is evidence which goes to show that Mrs Blake has been, if not murdered, then the victim of some very serious outrage."

Mr Watson tried to look as if the words had affected him less than they had.

"What is your evidence, inspector? I had an example this morning of your capacity to jump at conclusions, and call it evidence."

The inspector ignored the gentle imputation.

"Mrs. Blake disappeared last Thursday after-

noon , nothing has been seen or heard of her since, unless it has been by Mr. Blake or by you."

"Are you about to suggest that I have had a hand in murdering Mrs Blake ? You won't surprise me I should say that that sort of thing was quite on a par with your usual mental processes"

"Mrs Blake was last seen in the day-nursery. After she had gone blood-stains were found in it in various places ; on the child's cot were blood-stained finger-prints, as if she had clutched at the side , there were blood-stains even on the baby's cheek, as if, in a struggle with some assailant, she had leant over him , there were blood-marks right across the floor, on her work-table there was a pool of blood—the piece of work upon which she had been engaged was soaked with it , there were marks on various pieces of furniture Mr. Blake had his wife's handkerchief in his pocket, soaked with her blood You yourself saw it Do you deny it ?"

"Has it already come to that ? That I am asked for a denial, as if you were presenting a pistol at my head ?"

"All these things, coupled with Mrs Blake's mysterious disappearance, are capable of a very serious interpretation The police ought to have been advised at once In such a case secrecy was criminal. Yet the utmost secrecy was preserved—not a whisper was allowed to pass outside the house There was evidence —terrible, unmistakable—that some desperate, deadly

truggle had prefaced this unhappy lady's disappearance; yet not a hint of the truth was allowed to reach the proper quarter. Rumours have been flying about the place, but until I entered the house this morning I had not the dimmest notion of what looked very like the actual ghastly truth This concealment may —and quite probably will—result in a miscarriage of justice, and for that somebody will be held responsible."

"Hold me"

"You are a gentleman, and therefore, presumably, an educated man, Mr. Watson You should know something of your duties as a citizen, you must be aware that one of the chief of your duties is not to associate yourself with any attempt to cover up a crime. I grant that Mr Blake was your friend, but even that does not excuse the attitude you have taken up and apparently are still holding. You surely do not propose to shield yourself behind your friendship for Mr Blake, and say, because he was your friend, it is no business of yours that he murdered his wife?"

"Mr. Blake did not murder his wife—except, possibly, in your vivid imagination It seems that even a policeman's imagination sometimes runs away with him."

"I have had the house searched, Mr. Watson, since you left this morning, and one or two discoveries have been made which even you will admit point to a state of things which required instant and vigorous

investigation. In a corner of a drawer in Mr Blake's bedroom has been found a bundle of woman's clothing, thrust there in a confused mass, as by someone whose one desire was to put them out of sight Few women would treat their clothes like that, it appears that Mrs. Blake in such matters was the tidiest and most methodical of women. You should see the state these garments were in! The inference is that the person who thrust them into the corner of that drawer was a man. They are Mrs. Blake's clothes—all the clothes she was wearing that afternoon, down to her stockings and her shoes. There is blood on all of them, the under-garments are soaked with it As a consequence they have dried stiff—stiff as boards. Put two and two together, Mr. Watson, and ask yourself what deduction, under the circumstances, is to be drawn from the fact that that poor woman's clothes—all the clothes that she had on, mind—were concealed in her husband's bedroom—stiff with her own blood. What deduction do you draw from that fact?"

"I draw none."

"You are a bold man to say so Others will draw them, as you will find. You had an interview with Mr Blake in the small hours of this—Sunday—morning. What took place at that interview?"

"Look here, Inspector Hobden, the fact that you are an inspector prevents my punching your head You hide yourself, as a parson does, behind your

cloth; but when you presume so far as to ask me such a question as that, you can also presume that metaphorically your head has been punched—and that's the only answer you'll get from me."

"Then I must draw from your silence the deduction which, later on, a judge and jury will draw. I will give you an idea of what some of those deductions will be"

"You need not"

"In my opinion, Mr Watson, it is my duty to do so, and I shall do my duty."

"I told you this morning that, in my opinion, a country policeman's ideas of his duty are funny ones, and each second you are confirming me in that opinion more and more"

"On Wednesday night, the night before your arrival, Mr. Blake had a serious quarrel with his wife—about you."

"About me! Of all the wretched impertinent scoundrels that ever breathed——! The fact that you're a policeman won't cover you beyond a certain point What the deuce do you mean by saying that Mr. Blake had a quarrel with his wife about me?"

"Your assumption of indignation, Mr. Watson, will not do you the slightest service. As for your threats, if you're not careful I will have one of my subordinates in here, and I'll have you dealt with in another fashion. I've asked you what passed between

you and Mr. Blake in the small hours this morning. I've good reason for asking; I only do my duty by asking. You decline to give me the assistance I require, and which I've a right to require. You range yourself on Mr Blake's side against me, because that is what your refusal amounts to. Your doing so leaves me with no alternative but to take certain steps; but before I take them I will give you another chance. Once more, will you tell me what took place between Mr. Blake and you this morning?"

"How do you know that anything did take place between Mr. Blake and me this morning?"

"Don't descend to that sort of thing, Mr Watson. You, a gentleman, are not going to take up the attitude of a pettifogging lawyer who insists on legal proof for every transparent fact Do you deny that you had an interview with Mr. Blake this morning?"

"I deny nothing and I admit nothing. My position is that I decline to have anything to do with you of any sort or kind, Inspector Hobden, and that I shall continue to decline."

"I quite realise that that is your position, Mr Watson, and now you shall realise mine. I am going to place before you the matter as it at present stands, and the facts I have in my possession which bear upon the matter, and then, having done that, I am going to make to you an appeal"

"And suppose that I decline to listen—as I am entitled to, since, in England, still, I suppose one is

not forced to listen even to the most eloquent policeman?"

"Then, in that case, I'm afraid, Mr. Watson, that you leave me no option In England—you speak with rather a flourish of what is possible in England—so I take it that you are aware that in England in a case of murder there is a very serious offence known as being an accomplice after the fact. If you persist in taking up the attitude of which you speak, I intend to do my duty at any cost; and since I have good reason to believe that Mr. Blake has murdered his wife, I shall arrest you on the charge of being his accomplice after the fact"

CHAPTER XX

TWO POINTS OF WAR

Mr Watson was silent What seemed to him to be the enormity of the inspector's conduct held him breathless. Speech came back to him with, as it were, a sudden gasp.

"Then—then am I to understand, Inspector Hobden, that I am your prisoner?"

"You're to understand that you will be my prisoner if you persist in your refusal to give me that assistance which I can rightly demand of you. I believe you to be shielding a man who, when I can lay my hands upon him—and I believe that on a word from you I could do that quickly—will be charged with two murders"

"Two murders?"

"You know perfectly well that he murdered that man whose body was recovered this morning from the fish-pond, there are half a dozen witnesses who can prove it up to the hilt."

"Then they'll do an uncommonly clever thing, because the man you speak of has not only not been murdered, he isn't even dead"

"Don't tell that tale to me, Mr. Watson. Do you take me for a complete fool?"

"I should be very sorry to have to tell you what I'm beginning to take you for, Inspector Hobden; you mightn't like it But let me tell you this, I spoke to the man you speak of, and he spoke to me, less—I don't pretend to be exact to a moment, but probably less than half an hour ago."

"Mr. Watson! You can say such a thing to me—with a serious countenance? You mistake your man"

"I don't and I didn't. The name of the man to whom you refer is Edgar Halsey As I was driving from Rogate just now I met Edgar Halsey by the roadside. As I've told you, I spoke to him and he spoke to me; he was as much alive as you are."

"Then where is he now?"

"I know something of Mr Halsey, and I suspect more I rather fancy that I was the last person he wished to meet It was dark, we didn't know each other when we first met, but so soon as the recognition came he took to his heels I had the dog-cart and a restless horse to attend to. I couldn't follow, but that it was Edgar Halsey I'm as sure as I am that you're you."

"I shall have to ask you to repeat this statement, Mr. Watson, in the presence of others. But before doing so, I ought to warn you that it will be used in evidence, and you'll be held responsible for it."

"Don't talk in that big bow-wow style to me, man. I'm not a child to be frightened by a braggart policeman who is on the high road towards making of himself the biggest fool that ever even a policeman managed to do Halsey has been seen twice to-day by a person with whom I certainly have nothing in sympathy, and possibly by a dozen others besides I confess that when that person first told me I was almost as incredulous of his story as you are of mine, but now that I have seen the fellow myself, and spoken to him, and he has spoken to me, I know better."

"Do you mind giving me the name of the person who you say has seen Edgar Halsey twice to-day?"

"That I'll do with pleasure—young Bryan Norton While I was lunching with him at Rogate he laughed at the idea that Edgar Halsey had been drowned, and told me what I have told you"

"Is it absolutely certain that the name of the man who was found in the fish-pond is Halsey?"

"Beyond a doubt, I recognised him myself when I saw him in the coach-house."

"And you were then yourself of opinion that he was drowned—dead?"

"I was, but, as I heard you say yourself, in cases of drowning appearances are apt to be deceptive, and here was one in point. I may also inform you, since what Mr Norton said to me was not said in confidence, that he met Halsey after his quarrel with

Blake, and that he was then hatless Norton thinks that he had had some sort of a scuffle with Blake, in the course of which his hat fell into the water, where old Briggs saw it floating last night. Mr Norton has another theory. He thinks that Mr Blake met Halsey again early this morning, that yesterday's quarrel was renewed, and that Blake pitched Halsey into the lake—as I have no doubt he thoroughly deserved to be pitched Then Blake, fearing that he had done more than he meant to—I have my own reasons for knowing that it is extremely likely that Blake was in a state of nerves—was idiot enough to something like run away That explains his absence to-day But I have no doubt that, when he has thought things over, and has had time to come to his senses, he'll come straight back again—probably in the course of to-morrow—and tell the whole story. As regards Mrs Blake, you are on the wrong track, inspector—of that I am convinced There was a misunderstanding between them, I admit it——"

"Of which you were the cause?"

"Nothing of the sort. You've got the wrong dog by the ear I was never mentioned by either side, or thought of. I'd no more to do with the difference between them than you had"

"I know better."

"What on earth makes you say that? What do you know—or think you know?"

"What has become of Mrs. Blake?"

"I've not the faintest notion. If you think it will make my words more binding, I'll swear it, in set form; I never saw the lady in my life, so how am I likely to know?"

"You never saw her in your life? But you recognised her portrait."

"From whom did you get that piece of information?"

"Did you not recognise her portrait?"

"Someone has been playing the spy on a pretty liberal scale; but I suppose you have to deal with that sort of people in your trade. I recognised it to this extent—that I felt, and still feel, that I've seen the original of that portrait somewhere before, but for the life of me I could not and cannot think where."

"I'm bound to say, Mr. Watson, in face of certain facts which have been laid before me, that your story is a little thin Mrs Blake was heard to say to her maid, Simmons, that Gilbert Watson—which, I believe, is your name—had been the bane of her life, and was going to ruin it again. Then she added, in what I have been given to understand was something very like a burst of hysterical excitement, that now Mr. Blake would kill her because you were coming to The Beeches."

"Who on earth told you that infernal lie?"

"You shall learn in good time, Mr. Watson. I asked Mrs Simmons, the maid in question, what

truth there was in the statement. I had a very painful scene with her, she is her mistress's devoted servant. In the course of that scene she admitted, though with the greatest reluctance, that the words I have quoted to you had been uttered, and she then went on to assert that you have ruined her mistress's life, and to acknowledge that you were the cause of the quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Blake—the whole and the sole cause; and that, indeed, all the trouble had come about through you. Now, Mr. Watson, what have you to say to that?"

"I've got a good deal to say in a moment or two to Mrs. Simmons Where is she? That's not the first false statement she's made about me to-day, I'm beginning to wonder what the woman's motives can possibly be"

"I'm sorry to say Mrs. Simmons has also disappeared She left the house surreptitiously this afternoon shortly after my interview with her, and with her she appears to have taken the baby. You see, Mr. Watson, how difficult my position is; what obstacles are thrown in the way of my getting at the truth. The conviction has been strengthening, since my coming to the house this morning, to find the first piece of evidence removed, that I'm in the presence of something very like a conspiracy of silence; that everyone who ought to assist me in getting at the truth is anxious to have it burked. I had to wrench the truth from Mrs. Simmons; the m

I had done so she made off, with the apparent intention of doing her best to prevent my acting on it Your attitude is practically the same as hers. That the key to the whole strange business is in your hands I have a very strong suspicion; but, for reasons of your own, which I am compelled to say do not seem to be too creditable, you decline to give me access to it. You seem to forget, Mr. Watson, that in a case of this sort my bounden duty is to get at the truth, that, in a way, that is the beginning and end of my existence; and that, also, it is your duty to assist me in getting at it"

"Look here, inspector, I'm not a policeman, so I can't be expected to appreciate a policeman's point of view, but I'll tell you what mine is—at any rate, in this particular instance I'm more anxious to get at the truth than you are, having much more cause for anxiety I seem to be accused, by implication, of all sorts of things Not only, to the best of my knowledge and belief, am I innocent of all of them, but I would give a trifle to be able to examine the evidence, and the witnesses, but I'm not able to get at either This woman, Simmons, for instance, she's either stark staring mad, or she's an infernal liar. Mr Blake told me, in what you've called the small hours of the morning, his story of his difference with his wife, and I'll swear to you that in that connection never was my name mentioned, nor did he ever drop the remotest hint that I had anything to do with it.

Now, according to you, comes Simmons with her story. Man—I suppose an inspector of police is a man—I'll Simmons her when I get within reach of her! She's —she's an infernal old cockatrice—that's what she is —bred and brought up, I should say, from her cradle in ignorance of what the truth is"

"I can only tell you that she did not convey to me that impression this afternoon I generally have a feeling that a woman is lying, when she is—I ought to have, after my experience. The feeling was strong in me this afternoon that she was speaking the truth —not the whole truth, because I have no doubt whatever that she was keeping something back—but still the truth, and that very much against her will."

"Inspector, I own it! The puzzle's beyond me"

"What, according to you, is the cause of the quarrel between Blake and his wife?"

"According to me? That's how you put it? Thank you. Now, inspector, I'm not Simmons, and I am Blake's friend; I didn't want to listen to his story, but, as it was told to me, from my point of view it was as if it had been told to me as to a priest in a confessional I will only tell you this—that it had nothing to do with me, and that I swear—you being probably the kind of person who only credits a statement which is made on oath Beyond that, my lips are sealed Blake's quarrel with his wife is his quarrel—not mine nor yours, and I will add this—his best chance of making up that quarrel lies

in the fact that the cause of it remains unknown to anyone but their two selves. Take a tip from me—a mere layman, sit on the fence and watch the course of events. As yet your interference isn't needed; it's all rubbish about Blake having murdered his wife."

"How do you explain the blood-grimed clothes?"

"I don't attempt to explain them. I'm sitting on the fence, as I'm inviting you to do, having a persuasion that they'll explain themselves—in time."

"That's all very well for you, but it's no good for me. By that time the criminal may have escaped—probably will have escaped. My sitting on the fence while he was taking his departure would be regarded as something very like connivance, and that's what it would be."

"Very well, then; what do you propose to do? Arrest me as being an accomplice after the fact? That will be a first-rate start. What will you do with me? Put the handcuffs on, and march me off to gaol with gyves upon my wrists? My word! That would be a delicious wind-up to the most agreeable visit I ever paid in my life! Is that what you propose to do?"

"Do you give me your word of honour that you have no personal reason to believe that Mr. Blake has done any harm to his wife? You know what I mean by harm."

"I do—perfectly. I give you my word of honour that I believe the exact contrary; that he has not

laid so much as a finger on his wife in the sense you mean."

"Have you any sort of idea where he is?"

"Not the faintest. If I had I'd go straight off to him, and you might come with me Inspector, Mr Blake loves his wife, and I shouldn't be surprised if he were wandering about somewhere—God alone knows where—heart-broken for love of her."

"But you don't know where?"

"I do not"

"Nor have you any idea where his wife is? Or of what he has done with her?"

"I object to the phrase 'what he has done with her' He has done nothing—nothing, I'm sure of it. I'm violating no confidence in telling you that I believe she's as much in love with him as he is with her, and that, with some pitiful misunderstanding of what the position really is—inspector, I fancy it's hideously easy for a man and woman to misunderstand each other to the very edge of tragedy—and that she's wandering about in the same mad way he is—God again knows where. But I've seen strange things happen, as I've no doubt you have; and one reason why I'm sitting on the fence is because it's my conviction that—I'm not what is called a religious man, and I say it with all reverence—God moves in a mysterious way They've—they've got sundered; in every lute there comes in time a rift; but I've a kind of a sort of a belief—I say it again with reverence

—that God won't allow them to continue so; that, in His own fashion, He will bring them together again—most probably, I should say, without your help or mine There's my creed, inspector, and there's my apology for sitting on the fence. You can go on doing what you call your duty in any silly way you like. When it's borne in on me that there's any likelihood of my being able to interfere with any reasonable chance of my doing good, then you'll find that I'm a glutton at interference, but until that time comes, for me"—he pressed his finger-tips against his breast—" for me, the fence, inspector—the fence."

CHAPTER XXI

WATSON AND COX v HOBDEN

The inspector did not carry out his threat to its uttermost limit Mr Watson was not arrested, but the interview by no means closed on the note that gentleman would have preferred When at last he did escape—escape was the word he used—he had a weird feeling that it had been by the skin of his teeth. A very little more and he might have had to spend the night as Inspector Hobden's prisoner, and that, as he kept telling himself over and over again when he had escaped, would have been delightful

Had he had his own way, on his escaping from the study he would have quitted The Beeches then and there Beyond all doubt the responsibility had been taken off his hands, it would not be necessary to await the advent of Miss Ormond or of Blake's lawyer—Mr Markham—for that to happen, it had come about already To use a figure of speech, Inspector Hobden was in command of the ship—he had elected himself to the command, he was in charge of the helm, whether it went on to the rocks or not had become his affair He had made it abundantly

clear that he would brook no interference with his notion of what was the proper way in which to discharge his duties So, from Watson's point of view, there was no reason why he should remain in the house a moment longer And how he longed to be out of it! But, to continue the figure, the officer in charge had not the least intention of allowing him to quit the craft if he could help it. When Watson had hinted at a desire on his part to leave what had become to him a house of ill omen there and then, Hobden had replied with a still broader hint that if he tried to do anything of that kind he would have to put his threat into execution, in other words, he had given Watson to understand that his liberty was dependent upon his remaining in the house until the inspector gave him his sanction to leave, and that that certainly would not be given until the morning

Even when he had retired to his own apartment Mr. Watson had an uncomfortable feeling that some-one without had an eye upon his bedroom door; that if he attempted to leave it the fact would instantly become known, and explanations might have to be given However, when he was once between the sheets he slept better than he had anticipated, the day had not been all dark—there was the delicious episode of the afternoon spent under the Rogate tree. Fortune was so kind to him as to make that the centre of his dreams, so that when he awoke with the sun-

light streaming into his room, it was with a curious and exquisite feeling that a kiss had been pressed on his lips. It had happened in his dream; and in the first moments of his waking, it was with him still.

The inspector had slept in the house. The first thing which greeted Watson on his descent was that officer's figure at the foot of the staircase; apparently some of his myrmidons, if they had not slept, had haunted it, both inside and out

"Any news, inspector, of strange happenings in the night?"

The inspector was a trifle gruff.

"No news Nothing's happened, to my knowledge—possibly because certain persons have been warned. I've a notion that there isn't a creature in the house who isn't trying to get up to some trick behind my back, and I dare say some of them have succeeded The butler here has had telegrams from Miss Ormond, Mr Blake's cousin, to say that she'll be here this morning; and from Mr. Markham, his solicitor, to say that he'll be here as soon as he can."

"Then if that's the case, perhaps you won't object to my referring to a time-table to find out what is the earliest available train to town? My presence is certainly required no longer."

The inspector looked at him askance, his tone did not become less gruff.

"Don't you be so sure of that. I suppose you want some breakfast?"

"I should like some, with your sovereign permission."

"Oh, you've my permission to eat your breakfast, but after you've eaten it there are one or two questions I should like you to answer."

"Inspector, don't tell me you've been sitting up all night trying to think of questions you would like me to answer."

"I only want you to understand that you needn't be in any great hurry about starting off for town You came here, as I happen to know, to pay a visit to Mr. Blake, and the present circumstances are no reason, but all the other way, why you should cut it unnecessarily short"

"Unnecessarily short? Great Scott! You don't think I shall be cutting it unnecessarily short if I leave by the very next train But I—I may discuss the matter with you after I have had some breakfast"

While he was engaged on his morning meal, with a show of appetite which did him credit, he had a little conversation with Cox, who waited

"You did an eminently wise thing in sending for Inspector Hobden; he strikes me as being the most delightful, logical, and amenable of men"

The butler's reply showed that he was not slow in catching the ironical intention.

"If I'd known, sir, what I know now I should have left the policeman out I never heard of a man like Hobden He seems to take it for granted that we have all been doing something we didn't ought to; he's as good as threatened to lock up half the people in the place, including me"

"You don't mean to say, Cox, that he's threatened to arrest you?"

The butler pressed his lips together; he wore a dissatisfied expression, which somehow made him resemble a comic actor more than ever

"He has, he's as good as told me that I shall leave the house at my peril. And as for Adams, the nurse-maid, I hear she's been in hysterics half the night because of some of the things he's said to her. Sam Kennard, the groom, who is her young man, talks about punching Hobden's head"

"I also said something of the same sort to Hobden himself yesterday. So he's forbidden you to leave the house?"

"Practically, that's what it comes to He pretends to think that I know a great deal more than I do know, and that I want to run away for the express purpose of keeping what I do know from him—as if it were my business to blurt out Mr. and Mis Blake's private affairs to him I know my duty as well as he knows his"

"Practically, he has forbidden me also to leave the house"

Cox coughed, decorously, behind his hand.

"I should say, sir, that you're rather sorry you ever came."

"Sorry! Cox, are you so little a man of perception as to suppose that such a word as 'sorry' can describe my feelings? However, I have come, and Hobden doesn't seem inclined to let me go"

"I shouldn't care for Hobden, sir, if I were you; I should do exactly as I pleased. It seems to me he's not the slightest right to interfere with anything you may choose to do"

"Those are my sentiments to a T, and I'll tell you what, Cox—I'll have Hobden in here, and I'll talk to him in your presence—or, rather, if you like, we'll talk to him together."

Cox caressed his chin contemplatively with his finger and thumb.

"You might send for him, I think, sir; there are one or two things which I should like to say to Inspector Hobden if I'd an opportunity."

"Exactly; you've again expressed my feelings, Cox. You might present my compliments — you needn't make it respectful compliments—merely compliments—to Inspector Hobden, and say I shall be obliged if he'll have the extreme kindness to step this way"

The butler departed to do Mr. Watson's bidding. Presently the inspector entered the room, with his cap on his head.

"Do you always keep your head covered when in the house, Inspector Hobden?"

The question could scarcely have been more blandly put, yet the inspector's manner showed that he resented it none the less.

"When I'm engaged in doing my duty, and not in the presence of ladies, yes. This is not your house"

"It is not, or you would have been out of it long ago. You know as well as I do that you are a trespasser in this house, and I'm debating in my mind as to whether I should act as Mr. Blake's representative and treat you as trespassers generally are treated"

"Is that so? Have you sent for me, Mr Watson, to talk to me like that?"

"I have sent for you, inspector, to inform you that if you wish to arrest me——"

"Or me."

The interposition came from Cox.

"Or Cox, or any other members of the indoor and outdoor staff of this establishment, you had better do it now, because, as far as I am personally concerned, I intend to leave the house after breakfast, and go anywhere I choose."

Cox put in his word

"The same remark, Inspector Hobden, applies to myself and the other servants in the house, we intend to go in and out exactly as we choose, without recog-

nising your right to interfere with our freedom of action in any way whatever."

"You hear, Hobden? What remark have you to make, if any? Have I to consider myself under arrest, or—is anyone?"

But apparently Cox had not yet finished. Before the officer could speak he went on:

"I should like to know, Inspector Hobden, what you and that man Ray were doing about the house all night. I suppose that a policeman is no more entitled to play fast and loose with a gentleman's house and property than anybody else?"

"Certainly not" This was Watson "What has the inspector been doing?"

"For one thing, he's broken a vase for which I happen to know Mr Blake paid sixty-five guineas"

"That was an accident"

"You call it an accident? I suppose if you knocked that breakfast service off the table you'd call that an accident! What right has a man in your position to touch what doesn't belong to you, and of which you probably don't know the value?"

"I'm not going to be called to account by you, Mr Cox"

"No, but you'll be called to account before very long by Mr Blake."

"That I promise you, Inspector Hobden. If I

know anything of my friend Blake, he'll call you to account in more ways than one."

"I shouldn't wonder if he and his men had done a hundred pounds' worth of damage between them. You should see the state in which they left some of the rooms, sir—some of Mrs. Blake's most private belongings."

"You don't mean to say so, Cox. What a ruffian the man must be! And this is the man who tries to ride the high horse." Mr. Watson rose from the table. "There's one thing, Cox, Mr. Markham will be down here shortly, and he'll probably give this man a sharp lesson or two in the duties of a policeman. Country policemen are, of course, notorious; but I should hope, for the sake of the public welfare, that there are few of them quite so bad as the present sample. Inspector Hobden, I am going out—out of this room, and, if I choose, out of the house. Do you propose to stop me?"

Mr. Watson went close up to the inspector, who was standing just inside the door, and who regarded him with anything but a friendly gaze.

"I am going over to Midham directly, and I shall leave two of my men in charge, one inside and one outside, and there will be other men of mine about the place, with instructions to keep a sharp eye on the comings and goings and doings of everybody in this house"

"On what ground do you propose to leave what you call a man in this house, inspector?"

"I'm not compelled to give you my reasons, and I don't intend to."

"I doubt if you have the right to do anything of the kind; it is an outrage."

"I don't care what it seems to you. Let me warn you, Mr. Watson, that an eye will be kept upon your movements until matters here are satisfactorily cleared up or the contrary. You seem to object, Mr. Cox, to my having subjected the house to as thorough a search as possible last night. Let me tell you, for your information, that I'm going to come back from Midham with a sufficient number of men to search thoroughly the premises, out of doors as well as in, and the whole countryside"

With that the inspector turned upon his heels and left the room. Mr. Watson addressed the butler.

"A delightful man, Cox; a charming and agreeable man. What a pity there aren't more like him!"

"If there were, sir, I think I should feel like murder myself. Things will have to go very far before I ever send for the police again"

"The song says that the policeman's lot is not a happy one; but what would the ordinary creature's lot be like if every policeman were like that one?"

Suddenly he stood in the attitude of listening. "That —that sounds as if someone were coming towards the house."

"Yes, sir; it's a motor car coming down the drive. I shouldn't wonder if it were Mr. Norton, or his sister."

CHAPTER XXII

A RUN WITH MISS NORTON

It was Mr. Norton's sister, as Mr. Watson discovered when he went out to see. The inspector was on the door-step before he was, with a policeman by his side; they both of them were taking the liveliest interest in what was coming down the drive. The inspector said to Mr. Watson as soon as he appeared:

"If that's Mr. Norton in that motor car I want to speak to him about what you told me last night."

"It doesn't happen to be Mr. Norton."

"Then if it's his sister I'll speak to her."

The car coming that moment round a bend in the drive, it was seen that its sole occupant was Miss Norton. Mr. Watson held up his hand; the car instantly stopped.

"Why," asked the inspector, "did you do that?"

Mr. Watson smiled acidly; he was conscious of an overwhelming desire to keep the girl, if possible, from coming into contact with the inspector.

"Can't I stop a lady without your asking why? Hobden, how glad you must often be that you wear

a uniform! It must save you from so many discomforts." As he descended the steps the inspector went with him. "Inspector, where are you going? What do you want? Your society is not required."

"I take it, Mr. Watson, that even you'll admit that I've as much right to speak to the lady as you have."

Mr. Watson did not see how he could prevent his doing so, if he admitted his right or not. Side by side they moved towards the car—most unwilling companions, as far as Mr. Watson was concerned. When they reached it he asked the lady.

"Have you come to see me, Miss Norton, or Inspector Hobden?"

"I came to see you, Mr. Watson, to ask if there were any news."

"There is no news, except that, apparently because there is no news, Inspector Hobden seems to have taken the house, and all in it, into custody. I'm not sure that I'm not supposed to consider myself under arrest."

"You, Mr. Watson! Why?"

"Ask the policeman; that is, perhaps you'd better ask the inspector. It's no good asking me."

The young lady glanced at the officer. In what he said the inspector ignored Mr. Watson's remarks entirely.

"Miss Norton, when and where can I see your brother?"

"Why—why do you wish to see him?"

Mr. Watson was conscious that a startled look had come into the girl's eyes; possibly the inspector had observed it too.

"This gentleman tells me that your brother made him certain statements referring to a person named Halsey, of whom you may have heard. With regard to those statements it is necessary that I should see your brother at once."

"I don't know where my brother is just now, but I'll tell him that you wish to see him."

"Shall I come up to him, or will he come down to me, here? I don't wish to subject him to any inconvenience, but as the statements which Mr. Watson says he made were very remarkable and important ones, it is necessary that I should have some conversation with him in the course of to-day."

"I will tell him what you say. Would you like a run round in the car?"

This last inquiry, it goes without saying, was addressed to Mr. Watson, who vouchsafed a joyous affirmative.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure."

He was seated beside her almost as soon as the words were spoken. She looked at the inspector.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to get out of the way. I'm rather bad at turning, and I always want plenty of room."

The inspector seemed to hesitate, and to view

the gentleman's proposed little excursion with displeasure.

"You understand, Miss Norton, that it is of the first importance that I should see your brother to-day."

"I heard what you said." The inspector still seemed dissatisfied. "I'm afraid, inspector, that I really must ask you to stand aside, unless you wish to be run over."

"How far are you going, Mr. Watson? And when do you propose to return?"

"I don't reply to impertinent questions, inspector, even when they come from a policeman. You have twice asked the man to get out of the way; if he won't, I should drive on, Miss Norton."

The lady took the hint. The car moved, the inspector jumped rather than stepped aside just in time to prevent its coming in contact with his person. He seemed more dissatisfied than ever as the car began to go through a series of manœuvres which meant that the lady was trying to induce it to turn. The instant she had got its head round she started off at what was very like the legal limit down the drive.

"What a horrible man!"

The words—which, it is to be feared, referred to the inspector—came from the lady as if she meant them.

"He is one of life's little ironies."

"What does he mean about wanting to see Bryan?

And what did you mean by saying he had as good as arrested you?"

"That's another story. As to his wanting to see your brother, you know what he told me about that man Halsey?"

"That's what I've come to see you about."

"You know what he said about having seen him in the flesh, after he was supposed to be drowned, and how I thought he was pulling my leg? Well, it turned out that he wasn't, because I myself saw Halsey last night, as I was driving home."

"Mr. Watson!"

For some cause the young woman gave such a twist to the steering wheel that the car swerved right across the road, on to the path, and all but dashed into a tree. By luck, rather than by good management, just in the nick of time she twisted it the other way; the car went swerving round again, back upon the road. When they were going straight ahead again the gentleman asked:

"Do you often do that kind of thing?" The lady was silent. "That was rather a shave. Another inch or two and we should have been up against that tree, which, considering the pace we are going, would have been bad for the car—and us"

"I know. Do you think I don't know? Another inch or two and we might have been killed. Do you think I don't know it?"

There was something decidedly singular about the

young woman's manner. The gentleman wondered what it was, she seemed hardly in a mood which made for careful driving.

"What made you do it?"

"What you said."

"What I said made you screw the car round like that?"

"About what you'd seen when you were driving home last night; because what Bryan told you was a lie."

Her tone, if the thing were possible, was even more singular than her manner.

"I don't understand."

"What he said about having seen Mr. Halsey—that was all lies. Do you think that that policeman knows it, and that that's why he wants to see him?"

As she turned to ask the question she gave the steering wheel another little twist, enough to cause the car to make an ugly little swerve.

"Take care! You'll spill us if you don't keep a steady hand upon that wheel; you nearly had us in the ditch that time. Still, I don't understand. Which particular statements that your brother made with regard to Halsey were imaginative?"

"I dare say all of them. He didn't see him yesterday, walking about."

"Why do you say that? I saw him myself last night."

"You didn't."

"Miss Norton!"

"I beg your pardon; I didn't mean to contradict you quite so bluntly. You may have thought you saw him, but all the same you didn't."

He pondered her words, beginning to see that there must be something behind them.

"What reason have you for saying that?"

"It's—it's to talk to you about it that I've come to you this morning. I told you how utterly alone I was in the world; I could think of no one else to go to. Mr. Watson, do people easily go mad?"

She was sending the car along at its highest speed, steering none too well; they went flying past the corner just as a farmer's cart was coming round it. It was only by another lucky chance that a collision was avoided.

"Miss Norton, will you allow me to suggest that you should moderate your pace? You're not only driving dangerously fast, but, while you're going on at this rate, it's not easy to talk." The car perceptibly slowed. "That's better—a good deal; a little slower still wouldn't be amiss. There is no hurry that I know of; the steadier we go the better we shall be able to understand each other."

"I feel as if I want to tear along; as if I want to rush away, even from myself. All night I've been haunted, I haven't dared to close my eyes. Can't you see that I haven't slept?"

"What has made you so wakeful?"

"I want to tell you, but I don't know how—I don't know how."

She gave the car another little spurt, as if she had to let it go; then, as if remembering, checked it again.

"Oh! if I could end everything by—by smashing the car to pieces!"

He had a feeling that the wildness of her tone might be caused by something of which he did not care to think; yet he would have to discover what it was.

"What's that brother of yours been doing now?"

That he had hit the right nail on the head her manner made it abundantly clear; her young face grew all at once hard and stern and cold In some subtle fashion it had assumed a look as of premature old age.

"Can I trust you?"

"I think so; I hope so."

"Suppose—suppose someone dear to me had done something wrong—frightfully wrong, would you help me to shield him, no matter what it was he had done?"

Some seconds passed before he answered, it was a question which, on the face of it, required consideration.

"I will put my answer this way. I will do any-

thing you ask me, you wish me, to do; but at the same time, Miss Norton, I will recommend you to keep your own counsel if it is possible."

"Do you mean not tell you?"

"Don't tell me anything which, afterwards, you would regret telling me. I am willing to do exactly what you wish, without being taken into your confidence."

"But I've got to tell you what I want you to do, and I can only do that one way."

"Which way is that?"

The car covered perhaps half a mile before she answered. He did not look at her; he preferred to keep his eyes straight ahead; but, all the same, he was conscious that the things which were passing through her mind were mirrored on her face; he knew that by some sort of mental conflict she was trying to win to a decision. Then she began to speak, less heatedly, yet more strenuously, than she had done before. He had a feeling it was drawn from her as if it had been a tooth; he wondered that the pain of it did not make her cry.

"Last night, after you had gone, I went round to the stable to see if Bryan had taken the car—we have no proper garage—we use the stable. I asked Griffith who had locked it. He said that Bryan had; that he had taken the key, and had given orders that no one was to go near the stable while he was away."

She paused; he could see that she was trying to find the exact words—the fewest in which she could make her meaning clear.

"Bryan might have locked the door because he did not wish me to play any more pranks with the car; that might have been his reason, but I didn't think it was. I had had a feeling all day that there was something queer about him, and I know him so well—now. I have a key of my own which opens the stable door. I fetched it and in I went, saying to myself that I'd take the car for a spin if only to show Bryan that he wasn't going to keep me from it by merely locking the stable door. I'd brought a lamp, and when I got to the car I noticed what a lot of rugs and tarpaulins there were in the tonneau. Bryan never uses a rug if he can help it. I wondered what they were doing there. Then I noticed that my fur rug was among them, which is always kept in a locker. It was in the locker when I went out in the morning, because just as I was starting I'd opened the locker, meaning to take it out. Then I thought that as it was so warm an ordinary rug would do just as well, so I left it there."

She paused again. Mr. Watson was also silent; one might almost have said, judging from the expression of his countenance, uncomfortably silent, as if he waited in uncomfortable expectation for something unpleasant which was coming. Presently she continued.

"I wondered what my rug was doing there; why Bryan had taken it out of the locker. I thought that at any rate I'd put it back again. There were others on top of it; to get at it I had to remove them. Then, when I took my rug away, I saw that just underneath it was a man's hand."

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. BLAKE'S HUSBAND

MISS NORTON paused a third time. Mr. Watson was conscious of two things—that the car gave a little sideways jerk, and that there was a choking sound in the girl's throat, as if she experienced difficulty in breathing. He continued to hold his peace

"I let the rug fall back, ran out of the stable, locked the door, rushed up to my bedroom, and all night I was haunted."

"You are sure it was a man's hand you had seen?"

"Quite; I don't make mistakes of that kind. Quite! This morning, when I asked where Bryan was, they told me that he was not in—that he'd been out all night. I—I tried not to think of the stable, but I couldn't help it—I had to I got my key, and I went into the stable again I took all the rugs out of the car, and underneath them was the body of the man who had been drowned—Mr. Halsey."

"Miss Norton!"

"It sounds queer, doesn't it?"

"I—I can't help thinking—I—I can't help hoping that you were mistaken."

"I wasn't. Is it likely that I should make that kind of mistake?"

Silence. The car went on, more steadily, as if the driver had her hands more under control, which struck him, in some strange, vague fashion, as odd. Then he asked, when it seemed that she had made an end of speaking:

"What did you do?"

"I brought the car out."

Up to that instant he had been sitting perfectly still, so motionless that anyone might have been excused for thinking that it was because his muscles had grown a little rigid. When she said that there was an end to any delusion which might have been entertained of that kind—he rose right out of his seat and turned to her. Had the car swerved just then he would have been hard put to it to keep himself from being thrown out on to the road

"You brought the car out? What—what the devil do you mean?"

In his sudden agitation he possibly overlooked the fact that he was speaking to a woman; to judge from the look of him he was all in a moment half beside himself.

"I mean precisely what I say."

Her tone was as cold and even as his was suddenly

hot and broken; still on his feet, he stared at her as if he were dazed.

"Hadn't you better sit down? If anything makes me jerk the car you'll fall out."

As if impressed by the obvious truth of this he sat down; and, being seated, continued in an attitude which this time was rigidity itself. When he did speak it was in a voice which hardly sounded as if it were his own.

"What did you do with him?"

"He's in the car."

"In the car with us now?"

"Now you know why I was afraid of that policeman, and why I had to tell you. If he'd done anything he must have seen him."

Gilbert Watson was still; it was not surprising that he was startled into speechlessness. The situation was so amazing. That he should have been riding by her side in ignorance of what was behind. A thought occurred to him; it seemed scarcely possible, yet it was as possible as the other thing.

"You're not indulging in one of your brother's grim jokes?"

"I'll stop the car if you like; you can look for yourself"

Her tone was conclusive; there, in the bright sunshine, under the clear sky, he felt as if he were being frozen into stone. All that had gone before was as nothing to this; a numbing paralysis seemed

to be gripping all his senses. He heard her voice, but the words she uttered seemed to be part and parcel of some strange dream.

"Do you think that I didn't feel what you're feeling all through the night, when I was haunted? Don't you think that I'm not feeling it now? Can't you see how I was placed? I was so utterly alone, with—with that. I had to come to you, though I knew all along that it would be no good my coming."

When she had ceased he found his voice, though it seemed to him that he also was speaking in a dream.

"But it's such a mad thing to do."

"There was nothing to do that wasn't mad. What would you have me do, since I'm his sister and he's my brother? I thought that somehow we might put him back into the coach-house at The Beeches if I came to you."

"What good would that be? Why did your brother take him? Why did he tell me those lies about having seen him? He knew that Inspector Hobden was at The Beeches; he might have known that I should tell him. What trick was played on me last night? What does it all mean?"

"I'm afraid to think"

"You don't think——"

He stopped; the unfinished sentence was hideously eloquent. He threw back his head, and, turning his

face up to the sky, drew a long breath, as if desirous of washing something out of him with a great draught of clean, fresh air. He spoke again:

"What do you propose to do?"

"That's what I want to know."

"You mayn't like it if I tell you."

"What ought I to do?"

"Tell the truth"

"To whom?"

"To the whole world. This is a case in which every moment of concealment makes things worse. A thing like this can't be hidden for ever."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

"I'm not."

"Consider; there's one person from whom it cannot—yourself."

"That's true."

"Suppose that it could continue hidden from the world, would you propose to go through life, the only person who knows?"

"I asked you if you would help me to shield someone who was dear to me; you said you would do anything for me I wished."

"So I will."

"Then help me to shield Bryan."

Just there a broad road ran between hedges on either side. The gradient was against them, not much, but sufficient to check their speed. The country

on their right rose in a still sharper gradient; they were running by a meadow in which sheep were feeding. All at once someone shouted; there, half way up the slope, was the figure of a man. The lady exclaimed at sight of him:

"It's Bryan!"

In her surprise, unconsciously, she checked the car, which was already straining against the gradient; it stopped nearly dead. The figure came hurrying towards them down the hill. She put on speed so suddenly that the car started forward with a jerk; she began to bustle it up the ascent.

"What are you doing?" asked Mr. Watson, "your brother wants to speak to you."

"I don't want to speak to him, and I'm not going to"

In the latter of her statements she proved herself to be mistaken. As if divining her purpose her brother increased his pace. The gradient grew more acute, the car began to labour, she changed speed—or rather she tried to; the bungling fashion in which she handled the lever checked the car still more. Bryan Norton vaulted over a gate into the road just as she succeeded in effecting her purpose. The car quickened.

"Stop! Olive! What are you doing, you idiot? Stop when I tell you."

He bawled at her; she did her best to avoid

obedience, pressing the car forward with all the skill of which she was mistress.

"Get out of the way," she cried.

He stood right in the middle of the road. She swerved to avoid him. As she did so, with considerable agility he swung himself on to the foot-board. She broke into exclamations as he did so.

"Get off—you'll get hurt—you'll fall; I'm not going to stop—I tell you I won't; I don't want to speak to you. You'll spill the car!"

It looked very much as if between them the brother and the sister would do something to the car; bending over, he was doing his best to bring it to a stop in spite of her. Since neither showed an inclination to give way the result was the car went through some curious manœuvres. Mr Watson sat silent, as if oblivious of the fact that if anything happened to it it would be bad for him.

"Olive, if you don't look out you'll get damaged, I'm going to stop this car if I have to make it turn turtle before I do it—there!—the trick's done"

In a sense, the trick was done, without any dire happenings. The engine stopped, the car, drawn half way across the road, remained motionless, in such a position that any large vehicle coming along would find it difficult to pass.

"You're a nice young lady, Miss Norton. You

break into my stable, you take out my car; when I catch you on the high road you try to run away with it. If you'll come off that seat, I shall be very much obliged; I prefer to drive my own car, with your permission."

He stood beside her, one foot on the step, the other over the side of the car, a quizzical smile wrinkling his lips, and a look in his eyes which seemed to have a hypnotic effect upon his sister.

"Bryan," she gasped, "I shan't get off the seat, why have you stopped me?"

"That's rather a cool question, considering. Good morning, Mr. Watson. Have you had a hand in the abduction of this motor-car, or has my sister been playing the game all on her own?"

Gilbert Watson asked him a question, as if impelled by a sudden impulse.

"Was it you who last night played the part of Edgar Halsey?"

The inquiry seemed to take the young gentleman a little by surprise. He eyed his questioner, then his sister; then he got off the car back on to the road. His silence was eloquent, that his sister and Watson recognised its eloquence was clear from something which was on their faces He shaped his lips as if to whistle no sound issued forth. Instead, with an oddly varied intonation, he repeated the same word three times in a sort of crescendo scale.

"So! So! So!" He addressed himself to his sister. "So you've peeped inside? What price Meddlesome Matty? I see, I see, I see! This explains the abduction of my car, and what might you happen to have done with him?"

His sister answered in a sort of muted whisper.

"He's still there."

"No? So you've been carrying a passenger! This beats the story of Jonah and the whale. Three on the car and the third unseen."

"Bryan!"

"Olive! Sister! Pray, Watson, what are you doing in this galley?"

"I went to The Beeches to fetch him."

"Did he know?"

"Not until I told him."

"Watson, what a time you're having! Suppose an inquisitive policeman had taken it into his head to peep; then where would you two dear things have been?"

Descending from the car on to the road, coming round to where the young man was standing, Watson planted himself directly in front of him. The young man observed him with a smile.

"Well, Watson, what does this mean?"

"It means that I regret to have to tell you, in the presence of your sister, that, in spite of your youth, you're a scoundrel of a sort which I hoped only existed in fiction."

If the young man changed countenance it was only for a second. He smiled, not quite a friendly smile.

"And let me tell you, Watson, without any sort of regret, also in the presence of my sister, that you're a scoundrel of a type which, if the annals of the Newgate Calendar are to be believed, has been, and I fear still is, an uncomfortably common one."

"Bluff again! You're a master of it, young man; but do you really think it will succeed again, with that behind?"

"'That' can be very easily explained."

"I've no doubt—after various fashions. Which is the one which you have on the tip of your tongue this time?"

The young gentleman seemed not only unabashed, but neither hurt nor concerned.

"I'll tell you. Olive, don't wear that tragic countenance. Your brother's hands are—comparatively—bloodless. The tale I'm about to tell you is as simple as it's true; and though I admit it has its gruesome side, there's humour in it also You'll see presently why it was undesirable to tell the truth too soon."

The young gentleman's bearing could scarcely have been more jaunty. He had his hands thrust into his jacket pockets, his head was cocked a little on one side, a passer-by would never have

dreamed that he could be treating of so tragic a theme.

"I met Mr. Halsey in the tap-room of The Ploughman's Rest; The Ploughman's Rest, Watson, is our local hostelry—the quaintest place—I love it. He introduced himself to me as a friend of Mr, as well as Mrs Blake; at that time I should say he was about two parts drunk. After the house was closed he favoured me with his company as I started on my homeward way, and being then more than another part drunk, he yarned; his yarns instead of pleasing, offended me so much that I had to put him in a ditch and leave him there. There ended our first meeting. I met him again in the grounds of The Beeches, by the fish-pond."

"When was that?"

Mr. Watson asked the question.

"Friday morning. He had been having a discussion with Blake, which had all but ended in Blake putting him into the pond as I put him into the ditch. He told me as much in his first sentence; then added certain remarks, having reference to Mrs. Blake, which so ruffled my naturally even temper, that I all but did what Blake should have done. He, thinking that I meant to souse him, stepped back, and soused himself"

"You did not touch him?"

"I hadn't time; I might have done if I had had, but I hadn't; I was perfectly willing to lay

several fingers on him, he gave me no choice. He was nearer to the edge of the pond than he thought, and, stepping back, went in of his own accord, without the slightest help from me. I admit that I was a little startled, and I waited to see what would happen."

"You did wait?"

"Oh yes, I waited; long enough to perceive that the water into which he had managed to tumble wasn't very deep, and to see him scramble out again."

"Do you mean to say that he got out of the pond?"

"He was scrambling up the bank, and was as good as on the top of it, when I departed, with a few pleasant words of kindly farewell. If I had stayed until he was quite out, the scrimmage would have started again, and for that I wasn't anxious. I turned, and had gone perhaps half a dozen steps up the path, when I heard a splash. I didn't look round. I took it for granted that it was caused by the awkward way in which he floundered out, and that, as it was followed by silence, he had reached dry land in safety."

"You say you took that for granted, you didn't look to see?"

"It didn't occur to me till some hours afterwards that the silence might have had a different meaning to that I had given it, then I did begin to wish that

I had looked round. I had a bad time on Friday night, as you, my dear Olive, observed."

"I knew there was something wrong."

"There wasn't, in your sense, only my imagination conjured up strange visions. As I have said, I wished that I had looked round, or even returned to start the scrimmage all over again. In the morning I went down to The Beeches, and heard."

He took off his green felt hat to indulge in the characteristic trick of rumpling his hair.

"Your coming, my dear Olive, with the car, gave me a notion There wasn't a soul about, that butler Johnnie had driven them all away. I jumped into the car and began to turn; there are several ways of turning, as probably, Watson, Olive has shown you. My way then was almost as awkward as some of hers. I was right round at the coach-house before I had really turned, close to the door. I opened the door, nipped in, lifted my gentleman out, dropped him into the car, shut the door, and was clean away without, to the best of my knowledge and belief, having been observed of any. I was flying down the drive when I met the dog-cart, with old Hobden, and a common copper on the seat at his back. That gave me a little start when I saw them coming, but I'd thrown a rug over my passenger, and I realised that it was a case in which courage did it. So I pulled up and sent a message to you, dear Olive, and off I went again, leaving old Hobden as unsuspicious as

lamb. Then I did go for quite a spin before I finally made up my mind to take my passenger to Rogate, leave him where he was, and lock the coach-house door."

"If your story's true I don't understand why you should have interfered in the first instance, why you didn't leave him in the coach-house at The Beeches?"

"Don't you, Watson? Perhaps you will understand before you're very much older. As a matter of fact you are the immediate, direct, and sole cause of all that has happened, even of that."

He pointed a significant finger towards the back of the car

"You impudent young rascal!"

"Steady, Watson, steady! Neither my impudence nor my youth affects the issue, and I am no rascal. I repeat that you're the sole cause of all the trouble that's come upon The Beeches You needn't look black at me. Do you think I am easily frightened?"

"In what incredible sense do you mean to suggest that I've been the cause of what has happened?"

"In every possible sense, and I'm going to prove it. Olive, this fellow is, of all the liars that ever lived, I should say the greatest. He has passed himself off, to you, as well as to me, as a bachelor, a bachelor being a man who has

never married. He lied to me most monstrously yesterday when he swore that he had never married, since then I've seen a certified copy of his marriage certificate."

"You've seen a copy of my marriage certificate?"

"Of one of your marriage certificates; quite possibly for all I know you've been married on several occasions, and there are documents to show it He married a girl who discovered very shortly afterwards what sort of a scoundrel he was; living with him was like living in hell, so that she thanked her lucky star when, within little more than a year of their marriage, he deserted her."

"He deserted his wife?"

The question came from Miss Norton, who asked it with a strange look upon her face.

"He deserted his wife, this delectable person."

"Good heavens!"

The exclamation came from Watson.

"Save me from heaven if heaven has anything to do with such as you The next news, Olive, his wife had from him was that he was dead; quite possibly it was he himself who arranged that she should have that news. She believed it, and after an interval she married again Don't you see the tragedy that's coming?"

"Bryan! You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do, I mean just that, she

Blake in her confiding innocence and ignorance. Mrs. Blake is this fellow's deserted wife; he came to The Beeches knowing that—because he knew it. Can't we put him in the car, take him back to The Beeches, and drop him in the fish-pond? If you only knew, you beauty, how I'd love to do it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

FLIGHT

THE feeling possessed Doris Blake more and more that she was like a prisoner in a condemned cell, awaiting the coming of the executioner to lead her out to death. Gilbert Watson was to be her executioner; he was coming to The Beeches; she knew the day and hour of his arrival—exactly when he would appear to lead her out to a shameful end.

It seemed to her that Providence had marked her out with a pitiless hand to be the sport of a malignant fate. Why had she known this glimpse of heaven, if hell was so instantly to open and swallow her up for ever? Hers was the tale of the mouse and the cat, at the moment in which her heart leaped within her with the thought that she had escaped her doom was settled. She thought she had escaped from Gilbert Watson. When he deserted her he had done her the greatest kindness of which, apparently, he was capable. When he died—that, she told herself, was the act of God; she returned thanks to Him for the crowning mercy. The proofs of his death seemed incontestable; the whole story seemed so com-

plete, had been given her with such minute detail; it had never occurred to her for a single instant to doubt its truth. Now she looked back, she was aware that the wish was father to the thought; if it had not been so she might have made more careful inquiries. How she wished she had!

Then there followed the days of her widowhood, in which she had refused to put on mourning; she had not the wherewithal to buy it if she had wished to. What a struggle it had been—an incredible struggle as she looked back at it. There had been days together in which she had gone without food. And her clothing—how she had darned and patched, cut up one old garment to make another decent, resorted to all sorts of shifts to wear a decent appearance before the world! She had thought that for her the good things of this world were at an end, before she had ever had them; that through long, drab, hard years she would struggle on to—God alone knew what. Then had come the prince of the fairy tale, and as with a touch of a magician's wand the world was changed.

She had been slow to understand what George Blake's persistence in cultivating her acquaintance might mean; she had grown almost to regard men as wild beasts, who were ever seeking a woman to devour. George Blake was a revelation—a new discovery, less man, as it seemed to her, than angel Unconsciously to herself, she began to have for him a feeling which she certainly had never had for Gilbert

Watson. Her heart leaped within her when for the first time he told her what was in his heart for her. Yet she was afraid—she understood now with how much cause When he told her the same tale again and again, each time her fears returned, vague, indefinable, unspeakable; but, in spite of her fears, there was joy within her. And in the end it was the joy which triumphed, because George Blake would have it so

He had the subtlest way of winning a woman to his will—or at least she thought so—and the sweetest. He held open the gate of Paradise and beckoned her in, with a gesture which for a thousand thousand reasons there was no resisting The time came when she no longer even feigned resistance, and in they went together, and for once in history the promise proved less than the performance. It is given to few to know all that happiness may be made to mean—she knew. And the knowledge so enveloped her in an atmosphere of its own that she forgot that she had ever lived in any other And then there had been talk of the old friend George Blake had met, how he had asked him to come and see them, if Doris did not mind As if she did—an old friend of his! There should be killed for him the fatted calf, he should indeed be made the welcome guest

On the Tuesday she had seen lying on her husband's writing-table an envelope addressed to Gilbert Watson. By some chance, which came about naturally enough,

the visitor's actual name had never been mentioned in her hearing. She had spoken of him laughingly to her husband as the "W G.," which letters stood for the "Welcome Guest;" in the same spirit he had spoken of him in the same way to her She was the least curious of women, being, perhaps, in that altogether not healthy state in which all her interests were in her home. They were enough for her, engrossing her whole being, filling every nook and cranny of her thoughts The man was her husband's friend—well! Her husband did not mention his name—still well. He was coming to see them—better. He would be the welcome guest.

Then came the envelope Language fails to describe the feelings with which she saw the name in her husband's writing It was as if the foundations of the world had given way, and chaos come again. Such a horror of great darkness swept over her that for a period of time which she never was able to measure—it might have been seconds, minutes, or hours—she was as one gone blind. And when, as it seemed, she fought her way out of the blackness, her sight was still imperfect. And so it remained; she had never seen clearly since. She had lost her sense of perspective, so that she was conscious of blundering through a world in which all things seemed strange. She had put one question to the butler, and that one had been enough

"Cox, is the name of the gentleman who is

coming to-morrow Gilbert Watson, of Long Hinton?"

"Yes, ma'am, 'Gilbert Watson, Esq., Long Hinton'—that is the address to which Mr. Blake sends his letters."

The butler's answer supplied her with all the information she dreaded. There might be two Gilbert Watsons in the world, or several; there could not be two Gilbert Watsons of Long Hinton Long Hinton! Although she did not know it, the name had all the time been packed away in some secret cavity of her brain, and now came out to mock at her. The lies he had told her about Long Hinton, his uncle's place, to which he was heir! He would be a rich man some day—a man of importance; what honour he had conferred on her by stooping to her level for a wife! She had not been married long before she discovered that this uncle, of Long Hinton, had sworn never to speak to or communicate with her husband again, he must not dare to show his face within miles of the house which he had told her would one day be his. Yet, almost up to the hour of his desertion, he had always described himself, especially when he was in his cups, as Gilbert Watson, of Long Hinton

This was the welcome guest, the man who would be with them to-morrow, George Blake's friend; she had ceased to think of George Blake as her husband the moment she had seen that name upon the envelope. Her husband was the welcome guest, George B

—God wot what he was to her. He was not dead, she had been fooled, tricked, deluded; possibly he had done it of set intention She knew him; it was just one of those things which he would do, having his own evil reasons for doing it. Possibly he knew that in the eyes of the world she was George Blake's wife—had known it all along, had preferred, again with a sinister purpose, to hold his tongue So soon as his foot passed the threshold he would have her at his mercy—and she knew it He could shame her in all the many ways in which it is possible to shame a woman, from her knowledge of his character nothing seemed more likely than that he would drag her gleefully down before them all, jeering each time that she tumbled in the mire. Better—better death than that

It was that thought which had possessed her, more and more as the hours went by—better death than such a shame When, in the hour of her agony, she made open confession to George Blake, she still withheld the name of the man whom she had married, she had not dared to tell him that the man whom he called his old friend was the man who had shamed him and her, and who presently would shame them infinitely more. As she told her tale to Blake, even with her new, blurred vision, she could see that there was murder on his face—for very little he would have killed her Had she even let fall a hint that the man was Gilbert Watson she was quite sure that he

would have murdered him. She was conscious, as she confronted the man whose intimate she had been for more than three years, that, all in a moment, his whole nature was changed, that a frenzied desire had risen up within him to have an eye for an eye, so that he would have counted it nothing to take the man, even when he was a guest in his own house, by the throat and choke the life out of him. She was quite certain that he would not have rested until one or other of them was dead So she had not dared to hint at his name, though it was always present, in staring letters, as that of the executioner who shortly would hale her to ignominy which would never die, even though she herself was dead.

Again and again that Thursday afternoon she asked herself what she should do to escape, to each repetition of her question the answer was the same. Surely if she was to die it would be as well to choose the fashion of her death herself, and not leave the choice to her executioner. If she knew him, he would choose that of which all the attendant circumstances would be the most shameful, painful, and horrible for her. If she could have got a poison she would have taken, unhesitatingly, that way out; or even a revolver. She went in search of George Blake's—in vain She took a razor out of its case, then could not use it; that gleaming edge against her soft white skin! Her physical repugnance was greater than her desire to die. She reproached herself for a coward; but she

returned the razor to its case. As the day went on both her self-reproaches and her terrors grew; the clock was nearing the hour, already in all probability the executioner was on his way. Should she sit still and wait for him to open the door?

She was in that mood when at last she did the mad thing she did do. She was sitting at her work-table, pretending to work at some gorgeous piece of embroidery; she at any rate had schooled herself to sit still and not to wander like some mad thing aimlessly here and there. She took the scissors to snip a thread of silk; a thought occurred to her. People had escaped with the help of a pair of scissors—sharp scissors With a pair of sharp scissors an artery could easily be severed—and, she had always understood, painlessly She did not stay to consider—to think. She plunged the points of the scissors she was holding into her throat, and, almost in the same instant, drew them out again. The result of the incision she had made brought her quickly to the considering point; blood gushed out on to the table. Snatching up her work, pressing it to her neck, she felt it getting wet between her fingers Would she bleed to death? At least not there. The baby was asleep in his cradle. She hurried to him, blood dripping off her garments as she went. She did not dare to kiss him when she gained his side, her fingers, as she clutched it, stained his bassinet. A drop of blood fell on the sleeping infant's cheek,

he started. She saw he was about to wake; she fled in horror.

To her bedroom. There some remnants of sense returning, she pressed a piece of old linen several times folded to her neck; a strip of linen she bound round and round, as tightly as she could bear it. Her clothes were bloody; she could not go out of the house in those. Tearing them off, making their condition worse as she did so, she crammed them into the back of the cupboard, put on others, anyhow, and fled from The Beeches. No one saw her going, and probably the explanation was a simple one. There was a sound of hoofs coming up the drive; George Blake was returning. It was not unlikely that the whole attention of the household was centred on the master's home-coming; the mistress's flight went unobserved.

CHAPTER XXV

THE COTTAGE IN THE WOOD

BRYAN NORTON found her by the fish-pond—she could get no further. That mercurial, feather-brained young gentleman had come from an encounter with George Blake, in which he had almost succeeded in impressing that gentleman with the idea that he must be mentally deficient He had lingered by the house, half disposed to enter it and continue the discussion, only deterred by the belief that she was there and that a scene might hurt her. As he rounded a bend of the path he saw her on the bank beside the water, half-lying, half-leaning, in a huddled heap against a tree. For a moment he could scarcely credit that it was she; then—conviction came.

The scene which ensued was quite in the vein he loved. Her explanation was inchoate She was faint from loss of blood—he could see that for himself The spectacle she presented was not a nice one. It was with difficulty she could speak, yet she managed to make it plain that she had left The Beeches for ever, that she would not go back there, that he was not to take her back, that she wanted to go some-

where where she might be hidden He had a notion that her intention was to have hidden herself in the fish-pond—that she was trying to bring her courage to the sticking-point when he came up

He asked as few questions as was possible, then helped her up the path on to the road above. He practically carried her more than once, but she would not consent to stop—her one desire was to go on and on When they gained the road she was afraid that she could go no further, it was equally plain that he could not pick her up in his arms as if she had been a child, nor throw her across his shoulders as if she had been a truss of hay. He could not have gone far with such a burden. She was nearly as tall as he was, and probably heavier. She was in mortal fear of discovery, in an agony to reach some hiding-place. He told her he would get his car, made up for her a sort of bed under cover of the hedge, and promising that he would return as soon as it was humanly possible, tore off as fast as his long legs would carry him.

She was insensible when he returned with the car. He laid her on the floor of the tonneau—single-handed it was not an easy thing to do—then whizzed the car to a little cottage which was in a solitary place, among trees, on the extreme confines of his own estate, inhabited by an old woman named Jackson and her daughter Sarah Ellis. Mrs Jackson had been so long in the Nortons' service that, in her old

age, young Bryan had made of her a pensioner, installing her in this cottage, which was perhaps more picturesque to look at than comfortable to live in. She had her widowed daughter as a companion, the pension was just large enough to keep them both; they lived a solitary life together. Young Norton took the lady there because it was the only place of which he could think in which she was at all likely to find the concealment she desired. The furniture of the cottage was poor but sufficient, and very clean. The fine lady of The Beeches, used to all the luxuries which money could purchase, was put in Sarah Ellis's homely bed, in a room some eight feet square, floored with brick.

The old woman and the young one undressed her between them, while the young gentleman whizzed off again in the car in search of a doctor who lived far enough away to know nothing of The Beeches or its owners.

The doctor's name was Lauriston, a youngish man with spectacles; Norton brought him fifteen miles across country as fast as the car would travel, so that he arrived a little breathless. The wound was only superficial, Mrs Jackson and her daughter had already applied simple but efficient bandages, so that the bleeding was stayed. Doctor Lauriston observed that the woman—he called her a woman, because how could he tell that she was a lady as she lay in that bare hovel in Sarah Ellis's coarse nightdress—would

have bled to death if the bleeding had been allowed to continue until he came. He was curious to learn how the wound had been caused, but on that point received scanty information. As Bryan Norton whizzed him home again he found the young gentleman disposed to talk on every subject except that of the mysterious patient he had been to see in the queer, lonely cottage in the woods.

In the morning Doris Blake was in a bad way. The weakness resulting from loss of blood continued; she was plainly suffering from a weight which was on her mind, and the wound itself showed signs of inflammation Doctor Lauriston, being whizzed to the spot again, expressed an opinion that the case might turn out to be serious, an opinion which was so far justified by events that before the night was through the lady was delirious. It was a delicate position, one entirely to the young gentleman's mind.

There was not any appreciable danger, the doctor admitted, unless the inflammation became worse; what was needed was good nursing and attention. In every country village is a woman who is called in by her neighbours in cases of sickness; now that the professional nurse is growing a village institution her sphere of action is becoming limited, but her kind have done good work in their time Sarah Ellis had been such an one; she had nursed dozens of worse cases than this. She convinced the doctor, who, in

the circumstances, could hardly help but appear convinced, that she could nurse this one, she and her mother between them. The old lady was still very far from being in her dotage, and, about the house, was still active on her feet.

Doris Blake was left in charge of a trio of nurses, though the doctor supposed that there were only two. Bryan Norton installed himself as the third. He took one of the night watches, while, for a few hours, the women slept, and perforce had to listen to what, in her delirium, the patient said. Putting two and two together he drew his own conclusions; adding his knowledge of what he had learnt from her before her delirium passed, he already knew her story pretty well; it filled him with a desire to make short work of both the protagonists George Blake and Gilbert Watson.

When he found the arch-villain, Watson, installed in some strange fashion as his sister's friend, nothing would have pleased him better than to have been able to consign him to instant execution; the more picturesque the form the greater would have been his satisfaction.

The lady's delirium only lasted for a few hours, when she came out of it the first question she asked of Bryan Norton, when he appeared at her bedside, was, who knew? She seemed to be suffering no pain, nor did the incongruity of her position seem to strike her; she evinced no curiosity as to her surroundings;

her one desire was to learn who knew where she was.

When Bryan told her that no one knew, reiterating the statement with an earnestness which carried weight, he was rewarded with a smile which that crack-brained young gentleman felt more than repaid him for the part which he himself had played in this queer little drama.

Presently they fell to talking—though most of the strength seemed to have gone out of the lady, she still could talk. Although he asked no questions, the consciousness of a sympathetic listener seemed to move her to unburden her mind, perhaps the act of unburdening was in itself a relief, to women, in some of their moods, a confessor is of God, whence comes so much mischief in the world, for the lay confessor blabs. It seemed to do her good to tell this remarkable young gentleman her whole strange story, and, whether wittingly or not, she could not have chosen a better confidant While she wished it, he would hold her confidence inviolate, which was one reason why he did not annihilate Gilbert Watson he awaited the lady's permission

There intervened the episode of Edgar Halsey. That nature's rogue had been an acquaintance, if not a friend, of Gilbert Watson, when he still lived with his wife. He was also acquainted with certain facts in George Blake's life, from which he drew entirely wrong deductions, and from his knowledge he hoped

to derive some personal advantage. When he learnt that Gilbert Watson's wife was now Mrs. Blake he saw his way to a real good thing. The man was a born blackmailer, with one serious personal disadvantage, he drank. A blackmailer should not drink, if drink is apt to loosen his tongue. It loosened Halsey's. He told his tale, his lies, his hopes of doing the Blakes a bad turn and himself a good one, to Bryan Norton, quite mistaking that young man's character The better part of a night spent in a muddy ditch, into which Norton dropped him, when he was too drunk to scramble out again unaided, gave him a better idea of the kind of young man he was.

The story told by Bryan Norton of what had befallen him was the correct one, the surmises of Isaac Briggs, supported by Joe Sadler, were all astray Halsey had met Blake when that gentleman was in a much more dangerous mood than he had bargained for He was quick enough to recognise this fact when it faced him, and would, if he could, have kept the conversation away from the subjects which had brought him there Blake would not have it, his plain wish was to force on him a quarrel whether he would or would not And the quarrel came Blake indulged in such plain speaking that it had to come, Halsey feared each moment that he would be pitched into the water at his back, and was within an ace of being thrown, only, in the very act of assailing him, reason prevailed, Blake,

half beside himself with rage, rushed from temptation, leaving Halsey trembling like an aspen leaf upon the bank.

To him came Bryan Norton, in a very different mood from Blake's, but in quite as dangerous a one. Halsey's narrow escape had dulled his wits, he blurted out blasphemies and threats, foul innuendoes and scurrilous lies, before he realised that he might expect no gentler treatment from this youth than from the older man

Bryan told him, very gently, even very carelessly, with smiling lips, that he was about to make of him food for the fishes, and he set about doing it before Mr. Halsey had realised how much he was in earnest. Norton's account, to his sister and to Watson, of what took place was exact in all its particulars Halsey stepped back to avoid assault, and met with the fate it was his purpose to escape, he went backwards into the pond. At that exact spot the bank shelved; he caught at the herbage, drew himself up, but, in his bewildered state, just as he was reaching safety, he missed his footing, stepped on one side, and went down like a plumb stone into a ten-foot hole.

He got entangled in the weeds, he never rose again. Even if Bryan had returned it was doubtful if he would have been able to get him out in time, but Bryan did not return, and suffered many things in consequence Halsey haunted him, more and more

as the day went by and the night came. He inquired for him in his usual resorts, and when he learnt that nothing had been seen or heard of him, that haunting grew to be almost beyond bearing.

He had gone down to The Beeches with a view of relieving his mind as much as for any other purpose, and there learnt that he had not been haunted for nothing, the man was drowned; and, what was more amazing, George Blake was suspected of the crime. He could have given a very shrewd explanation of George Blake's disappearance, though in reality it would have been far enough from the mark, of one thing he was assured, it had nothing to do with the man in the pond.

His sister, Olive, had told Gilbert Watson that in any given set of circumstances her brother might be confidently counted on to do what no one expected him to do, and also what it would be difficult to conceive of anyone else's doing. He viewed all happenings from a peculiar personal platform, and treated them on lines of his own. He had, that morning, one of his characteristic fantastical ideas

The woman he had known as Mrs Blake was lying, not very far from death's door, at Mrs. Jackson's cottage in the wood, her husband was a fugitive, for reasons with which he supposed himself to be acquainted, but which were misunderstood by the rest of the world; the arch-villain, the cause of all the mischief, was hobnobbing with his sister, to all

appearance caring nothing for the ruin he had wrought; the dead man was in the coach-house, the police were coming If, on their arrival, they found that dead man there, a warrant would be issued, before long the hue and cry would be out against George Blake, for whom he had no personal love, but the woman in the cottage loved him.

The man was innocent of this particular offence; if he were taken and charged with it, whether he proved his innocence or not, the woman would suffer; rather anything than that Bryan Norton was quite capable of going to preposterous lengths to save her from even prospective pain He knew that you cannot prove a murder without a corpse; if he conveyed Edgar Halsey to some place where he could not be found, the fact that the murder had been committed could not be established, no warrant would be issued, there would be no hue and cry, George Blake would be charged with nothing, and the woman would not suffer.

So he conveyed Edgar Halsey from The Beeches in the motor car in which his sister had come; taking on himself, light-heartedly, a risk which would have unnerved the average man, with a whimsical notion of saving a woman pain The woman in question did not grow better. Doctor Lauriston began to show concern. He had discovered, for himself, that his mysterious patient was a lady. He was beginning to ask questions about her which received unsatis-

factory replies; the patient herself would tell hi nothing, the women of the house would tell him littl more, while young Norton had an eel-like quality o evading his inquiries which, while it amused him made him more than ever convinced that the patien in the cottage stood for a very singular tale indeed. He was a struggling practitioner, lately arrived in that village fifteen miles away, still without a vehicl of his own, than which, in the case of a country doctor, no fact could be more pregnant with meaning. He knew very little of the people in his immediate neighbourhood, absolutely nothing of the dwellers round about that cottage in the wood. If Norton had not told him a deliberate lie he had as good as suggested one; he had led the doctor to understand that he himself was a casual acquaintance of the lady, who had come from London for reasons of her own of which he knew nothing, and that, as far as he knew, she knew no one for miles around.

The doctor told Bryan Norton quite plainly tha the case was likely to be more serious than he had at first supposed

"It isn't only that the quantity of blood she los has left her in a state of utter collapse, but, clearly, she has something on her mind, she is going bac instead of forward If something isn't done, I canno answer for the consequences."

"What do you mean by 'If something isn't done'?"

"Mr. Norton, do you know that you are incurring a very serious responsibility?"

"My dear sir, what business is that of yours? Perhaps incurring responsibilities may be a hobby of mine."

"It isn't a hobby of mine, and I see myself confronted by a responsibility which I have no intention of incurring if I can possibly avoid it. I am inclined to think, Mr Norton, not only that it is my duty to communicate with the police, but that I ought to have done so before"

The young gentleman started; it was not easy to take him by surprise, but the doctor's words had plainly done so.

"What conceivable reason can you have for saying that?"

"If this lady is not actually dying, unless she quickly takes a turn for the better, she very soon will be beyond the hope of recovery The original cause of death will be that wound in her throat, which never came by accident, Mr Norton. If death comes it will be a case of murder or suicide. In that event where should I be when it becomes known that I have failed to advise the police of such a very serious state of affairs? I say nothing of your position, you'll have to make public the story which I am convinced you have been keeping from me. As you say, incurring responsibilities of that kind may be a hobby of yours. You must

look after yourself, and I, Mr. Norton—I will look after myself too."

There was a significance in the doctor's words and manner which made the young gentleman much more uncomfortable than he would have cared to own

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SOUND

JUDGED by ordinary standards George Blake's conduct suggested that his mental condition was in as parlous a state as the lady's; in such positions as his, ordinary standards go to the wall When, without a moment's warning, a man sees everything go from him which he most values, his outlook on the world is likely to be, at least for a time, abnormal, his plight is rendered worse if, as was the case with Blake, it is the first knock-down blow which Fate has dealt him.

George Blake's life had been uneventful; the happy, even slightly monotonous life of the English country gentleman, with well regulated tastes and a more than efficient income. As far as he knew, the histories of his progenitors had been as uneventful as his own. As a consequence he had taken up, perhaps unconsciously, that curious mental attitude which is apt to sneer at the notion that the unusual ever happens out of the sensational novel; when the plain truth, of course, is that the unusual happens most of the time. That tragedy, or, as he might have phrased it,

vulgar melodrama, should ever come into his well-ordered existence—the idea was as incredible as it was horrible. That events could ever have shaped themselves as they had done, he would have been incapable of even dreaming.

Now that everything which he had deemed impossible had come rushing on him, and that, be it always remembered, without an instant's warning, no wonder he lost his mental balance. He made one discovery; that there was in him a capacity for rage that was Othello-like in its intensity. In his first wild frenzy it was only by the grace of God that he was kept from doing hideous violence to the woman whom he had thought his wife; and when the first passion had gone he was still as one distraught. As an American idiom has it, he "saw red"; there was in him a desire to have vengeance upon someone; hence Edgar Halsey's narrow escape. But it was not only that he was consumed with inward rage, the whole external aspect of the world was changed, it had become for him a melodramatic universe indeed. There was no light in it, the sun was dark; Nature wore a forbidding aspect, there was no joy anywhere, or promise of joy.

Such havoc had misery wrought in him in a few hours that imagination played with him fantastic tricks, the imagination which he had always declared everyone could keep easily in control. Eyes seemed to glare at him from an angry heaven, fingers pointed, voices

screamed; from these things there was no escape. The voices told him that he was to blame as well as the woman, that it was he who had led her to sin, that it was he who had driven her out to bear alone the punishment which he had brought on her. All his life he had held forth, when opportunity offered, on the monstrous wickedness of suicide In no conceivable circumstances—he had proclaimed it, as it were, from the housetops—could there be excuse for it. Yet in the small hours of Sunday morning he had tried to blow his brains out; Gilbert Watson had all but caught him in the act.

Watson had taken his revolver with him when he went; before leaving he had extorted from him a promise that he would not repeat his attempt on his own life in any shape or form. But the dawning day found him, to all intents and purposes, a maniac. Accustomed to the most regular life, to regular hours, he had not been able to close his eyes, except in agony, for three nights and days—such nights and such days! Sleep might have saved him, but sleep would not come; his tortured brain seemed burning, so that his head was hot to the touch. In the clear, clean morning air he sought, half-witless, for cool and calm.

He came to the fish-pond; it had haunted him, as he had told Watson, ever since his wife had gone. Scarcely for a minute had it been absent from his mental vision. Now he saw it, with his waking eyes,

as it lay sparkling and smiling in the rays of the early morning sun.

How fair it was! How still! With what a promise of coolness in the water! Was—she there? If so, she was better off than he—much. If she was there, in which part would he be most likely to find her? He wandered round the placid sheet of water, in and out of the trees, through gorse and sprouting bracken, now close to the water's edge, now on the top of a sloping bank above it. His morbid fancy played him pranks. More than once, in the glancing sunlight, he thought he saw her face, shining up at him, now from this spot, now from that, just as he had seen it in his dreadful, haunting visions. But there was nothing terrible about it then, nothing in any way forbidding. Once he caught sight of her in the shimmering patch of shining water which glowed like silver, and she smiled He was sure she smiled He could see her face quite clearly, framed about by her glorious hair; he could even see her hair. And on her sweet, dear face there was a tender little smile of perfect peace, he saw it perfectly, but for an instant only. The glancing light went on, her face with it, smiling as it went He had a sense of sudden loss —where had she gone? Why should he not go after her? The water was so inviting, so cool, it was only —only a step, only one step, and he would be with her. With her, where she was.

* * * * * * *

There was a keeper whose name was Andrew Holt, a dour, elderly man. He had known no other employ His father had lived all his life with the Blakes, and had died head keeper. This Andrew Holt was now head keeper in his father's place. He was an early riser; week-days and Sundays he was no lie-abed. It was no credit to him, he would not have been happy had he been compelled to stay between the sheets long after the sun had risen In winter the sun was later—he was later too; but in the perfect May mornings which they were having then, it would not have been easy to keep him in bed when the sun was laughing in the clear blue sky. He was a Nature lover, although he did not know it; to his mind the wood never seemed so fair as at the hour of the sunrise; quite apart from his professional duties, then was the time he loved best to be out.

That Sunday morning he was out for his usual tramp. He had seen his master, though his master had not seen him. He was acquainted, as were the rest of the folk on the estate, with the trouble which had befallen him, he understood, quite well, without asking, what might be the state in which George Blake had come out into the woods—he would be seeking there something which he could not find in his empty house Holt only had one glance at his face, but that showed him enough; there was the tragedy which had come into the man's life written large all over it, the keeper had eyes with which to

see it No wonder, with that story on his face, the master sought for something in the seclusion of the woods.

George Blake was standing by the fish-pond when the keeper saw him. Holt was, again without his knowing it, after his own fashion, a gentleman. He did not need to be told that this man had probably come out in search of privacy, to be alone. Holt had only to suspect such a desire to do his best to see that the desire was gained. Under ordinary circumstances he would have hailed his master; they had common sympathies, and were the best of friends; there would have been a talk, possibly a ramble together; they had been companions in many and many a woodland stroll. Now Holt's instinct warned him that his society, or anyone's society, was probably the last thing his master wished for. Instead of moving towards him he moved farther away; George Blake should enjoy the solitary communion with Nature which his soul was craving, as Andrew Holt supposed.

The keeper had not gone very far before his keen ear detected an unusual sound; it was his business to know what an unusual sound in that habitat of game portended. The creatures he guarded had enemies of various sorts, at all stages of their being, on two legs and on four. What noise was that which he had heard? It came from the lake. Was Mr. Blake still there? Probably it was he who had caused it.

For some reason the notion filled Andrew Holt with a feeling of vague uneasiness.

What noise had it been? It had been followed by perfect silence. The keeper's trained perceptions told him what it had most resembled; it sounded as if someone had walked into the water; not fallen in, but just walked in, a step at a time; walked in, but not out. The following silence suggested that the walker, all at once, had found himself out of his depth, and stayed there

Holt hardly knew what to do. After all, it had been quite a simple noise, capable of a most natural explanation. He had realised that his master wished to be alone; was he entitled to intrude upon him now, seeking for an explanation where, quite probably, none was needed? He thought not. He continued his onward walk. Then stopped—to question himself again.

How still it was! He had heard his master moving; he would have known that someone was there had he not seen him; he would have detected sounds which to him were full of meaning—had heard them, indeed, after his master was out of sight. But now, since that sound as of someone walking into the water, they were gone—all was still. He did not like the stillness following that sound. No harm would be done if he strolled in the direction of the fish-pond. He retraced his steps; the lake came in sight; there were no signs of Mr. Blake.

He could have located, within a few feet, the spot from which the sound had come. Presently he had it in full sight—nothing to point to the presence of Mr. Blake. Stay! What was that floating on the face of the water? Instantly Andrew Holt started off running at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TWO WOMEN

ANDREW HOLT, though past his first youth, was a strong swimmer; he had George Blake on the bank in a surprisingly short space of time. The question was, what was he to do with him? It needed no seer to tell him what had happened. George Blake had not strayed into the water by misadventure; he had gone there with a set and dire purpose He also was a swimmer—a better swimmer than Holt himself; it must have needed a very singular sort of resolution on his part which had brought him so near to drowning within twenty yards of land; it seemed to the keeper that he must have kept himself under the water by sheer force of will. There would be scandal if he took him back to the great house.

The keeper had no doubt that when George Blake returned to himself the last thing he would wish would be to have his madness known He would never again be able to hold up his head as he had used to do if what constituted to him the whole world was aware that he had tried to drown himself in his own fish-pond. Yet the truth would become common public

property if he were taken back to his own house in the state in which he then was. He was not dead; he could only have been a few minutes in the water; there had not been time for him to die. A few seconds more, if he had sunk again, he might have effected his mad purpose; as things were, it was not very long before he gave very obvious signs, not only of life, but also of returning consciousness The keeper was a man who knew his own mind He was pretty sure that if his master did return to consciousness he would go back to The Beeches, and the tale would be out. His own cottage was less than four hundred yards away, on the crest of a slope, in the heart of the wood. If he could get him there he would have him undressed and in bed before full consciousness was back again; and then, he would keep him there, until his clothes were again in a condition in which they would not be likely to cause gossip.

Andrew Holt carried his master across those intervening three hundred yards and more to his cottage. He was strong and in good condition, but by the time he had got him there he had had about enough When he came in sight of his cottage he called to his wife. She, coming out, was not unnaturally surprised to see him with a man in his arms, borne like a child The keeper, however, was the head of his wife, it was enough for him to bid her ask no questions but to come and bear a hand. Between them they bore George Blake in Holt's programme was carried out;

he was snug in bed before he regained sufficient consciousness to enable him to inquire whereabouts he was. But in one respect the keeper's expectations were not realised Although his master was fully conscious, and showed no sign of being injured, he evinced nothing which pointed to even the faintest desire to return to his own house; on the contrary, he seemed quite content to stay where he was, between the sheets of the best bed in the keeper's cottage. Nor, if Holt had been better acquainted with the facts, would he have wondered. The man was wearied out and out; his brief stay in the water had supplied, as it were, the finishing touch, and served as a narcotic which compelled him to sleep. The Holts asked no questions; the keeper knew his place better, and his wife did not dare When Blake came back to the world, he saw the keeper standing by his bed, and he asked him:

"Is that you, Holt? Where am I?" The keeper told him. Blake sighed—a sigh, it seemed, rather of relief than of pain. "I'm tired"

That was all he said; he shut his eyes, and as soon as they were shut he was asleep. The keeper waited; there was no doubt about it—his master was sleeping as soundly and as peacefully as a child. Holt touched his wife on the arm; husband and wife stole out of the room.

All that day George Blake continued to sleep. Now and again his host, or his hostess, would open

the door, very gently, and move on noiseless feet to his bedside, to learn how things went with him Plainly things were going very well; he could not have enjoyed more restful sleep had he been the happiest of men.

Without, in the world outside the cottage, were alarums and excursions. The air was full of portents, things were happening; never had that quiet place known so much excitement before. Holt and his wife debated the question as to whether they should be told up at the house what had become of the master, and where he at present was. They arrived at no very definite decision Holt went out to reconnoitre In certain eventualities at least Cox, the butler, was to be made acquainted with his master's whereabouts, possibly, also, the friend of Mr. Blake's, who was staying as his guest. But all ideas of telling anyone were soon driven out of the keeper's head He had not gone far before he heard of the man who had been found in the fish-pond, and of how George Blake was supposed to have put him there. His first impulse was to treat his informant, one of the under-keepers, to a taste of his stick—he did let him have the rough side of his tongue—but when he found that the whole place was full of the story, and what a very likely one it was, he realised that the less he said and did the better. The one thing he had to do was to keep the fact of his master being where he was a secret, locked in his own bosom. It might not be difficult,

no one had the least suspicion—if only that wife of his would hold her tongue.

Back he went to lay on her his marital injunctions. When she heard the tale she perceived the necessity of silence as well as he did—a great fear shot out of her eyes.

"Do you think he did it?"

She asked the question with bated breath, as if fearful, if she spoke above a whisper, that she might be heard Her husband was standing with his back to her and his face to the window, cramming tobacco into the bowl of a pipe

"I think nothing—you think less; let things be Keep a still tongue, don't breathe so much as a word to anyone that he's here—not even to Sarah Ellis, to whom, as I know, you say everything. There's men been hanged by women's chattering tongues before to-day. You understand?"

She did not tell him in so many words that she understood, but she did, and he knew it; his passing reference to the hangman had driven his meaning home. Andrew Holt went to and fro, in and out of his house, all that livelong day, and each time he returned he retailed to his wife the gossip that was going He knew that if he kept her posted in the progress of events she would find it easier to bear the burden of silence that he had laid upon her

In the afternoon she had a fright. Andrew was out—had not long been gone. Mr. Blake still slept

she had peeped but a minute or two before to see It was strange how quietly he slept, especially if this tale that was being told of him was true. She did not think that if she had done a man to death she ever would sleep quietly again, she hoped that this peaceful slumber meant innocence She knew that the police were at The Beeches Perhaps they were searching for the missing man Suppose one of them strayed that way in Andrew's absence—what then? She would have to keep all her wits about her if she was to do her husband's bidding, in the spirit as well as the letter. She trusted that no such mischance would befall her—that no curious constable would find his way to that retired place All the same there was always the possibility. Andrew knew this as well as she did, it was partly on that account he had promised her that he would not be absent long, lest, while all alone, she should have to deal with such an intruder

She had seated herself by the window, her volume of sermons open on the table in front of her She was a religious woman, the church was at some distance from their cottage; she was not able to go there as often as she would have liked, but always if on Sunday morning she was not able to go to church in the afternoon she read a sermon Since it was always out of the same volume, and she had been through it over and over again, she knew some of them almost by heart Such was the case with the one which she was then supposed to be reading, which was

fortunate, for the reading was largely an affair of supposition only, her thoughts were anywhere but on that printed page—her eyes were seldom on it either. They would look out of the window, fearing to see an undesired visitor come strolling along the garden path

It was between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next that she had her fright, the gate clicked She rose, with a sudden spring, right out of her chair. To some the sound would have seemed commonplace enough, but, living the life she did, in that lonely place, her ears were like her husband's, trained to detect nice differences of sound. She could always tell when it was Andrew who had opened or shut the gate, although she could not see him. That was not Andrew who had clicked it then, she was sure, she could have sworn it. There was a deliberate fashion about the way in which he raised the latch and let it fall again which had nothing in common with the sudden, sharp click she had heard just then Someone was coming who was not Andrew

She was, as a rule, the least nervous of women; she could hardly have continued to lead the life she did had it been otherwise, but that day's happenings had set her nerves all in a jangle She stood there, with her hands clenched, scarcely daring to breathe, waiting for the first glimpse of the figure coming along the path. It was a winding path, the garden

was a large one, filled, that part of it, with bushes and fruit trees, there was generally an interval of several seconds between the opening of the gate and Andrew's coming into sight.

Listen!—and how she listened! Whoever it was who had opened the gate was in a hurry, unless she erred, someone was running towards the cottage. That her perception was not at fault was presently shown by the figure of a woman coming running round the bend. She exclaimed at sight of her:

"Sarah Ellis!"

It was an exclamation of relief; this was no one whom she feared. Then she thought of what her husband had bade her, not to breathe a word even to Sarah Ellis. Not only was she her cousin, and her most intimate life-long friend, but she had married her brother Tom. Tom was dead, Sarah was a widow, and now lived with her mother, Mrs Jackson, in one of Mr Norton's cottages over beyond Rogate. That was at some distance from the Holts; yet, since Tom Ellis's death, the intimacy between the women had grown greater rather than less. As Andrew had it, there was little they did not say to each other. The sight of Sarah always did her good, she was glad to see her now, but there was Mr. Blake asleep in the best bed, and there were her husband's words.

Mrs. Holt, crossing to the door, hastened out to meet Sarah while she was still half way along the path. She might be disturbed in her mind, but she

knew the other so well that she needed but a moment's glance to become aware that her disturbance was nothing to Sarah's She was panting, as with the haste she had made, and with something more than haste At sight of Mrs. Holt she stayed, casting anxious glances round her. She was in no mood to offer ordinary greeting, seeming to be beyond all things anxious to come at once to the subject which had brought her.

"Martha, I can't stop, I've come as fast as I can, and I shall have to go faster back again, but I felt as if I had to come, even if I had to run the whole way"

She looked as if she had run the greater part of it. Mrs. Holt's impulse was to ask her in to rest; but she thought of the sleeper, and hesitated Luckily Mrs Ellis made it clear, before she had a chance of speaking, that she was as unwilling to enter as the other was to ask her in

"It's no good, Martha, I can't come in, I haven't the time; if I did I should stay longer than I ought, and I've got to hurry back. Can't you come a bit of the way with me, and we can talk as we are going?"

Mrs Holt would have liked to, but how could she?

"Andrew's out, I'm expecting him every moment; he'll look to find me in, he'll be wanting his tea. I can't come with you till he is back, I doubt if I'll be

able to manage it then. But what's wrong with you, Sarah, I've never seen you in such a state before?"

Mrs. Ellis gripped Mrs Holt's arm with both her hands, and coming closer to her, whispered in her ear.

"Martha, Mrs. Blake is at our place, and she is dying."

"Sarah!"

"It's Gospel truth, as true as that you and I are standing here."

"But I don't understand."

"No more do I, not even yet I don't, and that's what frightens me. You'll not say a word to anyone about my having told you, not even to Andrew."

"I don't find it easy to keep things from him, and I don't like to either."

"I know you don't, but you'll have to keep this till I give you leave. I didn't ought to have told you, but I had to tell someone. I'd have gone out of my mind if I'd had to keep it to myself much longer, and there wasn't anyone else but you I could tell. Martha, if she dies it will be because she's killed herself, or because someone's killed her."

"Sarah!"

"It's true, as true as Gospel. And there's all the country looking for her, and Mr. Blake, I'm told, half out of his mind, and there's no one knows she's at our place, dying, except mother, and me, and Bryan Norton."

"Bryan Norton? How comes she in your place? And how comes he to know?"

In broken, almost incoherent phrases Sarah Ellis told the tale, to which Mrs Holt listened with eyes which grew wider and wider open The wife in such a plight in one cottage, the husband in another, and that beautiful house standing empty what did it mean? Although the tale was such a strange one it did not take long to tell, as Mrs. Ellis told it No doubt under other circumstances the narration would have been the occupation of a whole day; it was an example of how much meaning women can cram into a few words, if it pleases them Sarah Ellis did not stay a quarter of an hour, probably not more than ten minutes; in that short space of time she managed to give Mrs Holt a very sufficient notion of the state of affairs at her mother's cottage—the state of affairs, that is, from her own point of view, she had made the tragedy, which she saw coming, at least as plain to her as it was to herself

"Mr Norton, he made me promise to tell no one, so don't you say anything, even to Andrew! Mr Norton's that sort that if he found out I'd been talking when he'd told me not to, he'd have us out of the cottage, and stop what he gives mother straight away Then what would become of us?"

"I'll say nothing, even to Andrew, till you give me leave But, Sarah, if she dies, what then?"

"Martha, the doctor himself is in two minds,

she may be dying, and she mayn't, I can see that he's not sure, and I'm not sure. You know there's a many I've seen die, I can tell when death is coming better than a young man like him can, whether he's a doctor or no, and I tell you I'm not sure, and I'm afraid. The moment I am sure I shall come to you again; it may be to-night, it may be to-morrow, it may be any time, but, if I do come—if I do come, it won't be very long first; then I shall want you to tell Andrew; I shall tell him myself; I've more faith in Andrew than in any man I know."

"You've cause to; in any time of trouble I'd trust him, next to God"

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT DAWN OF DAY

Mrs. Holt bade Sarah Ellis "good-bye" at the gate; she ventured so far, though she dared to go no farther. When she returned to the house she gently opened the door of the sleeper's room and stole on tiptoe to his bedside. How quietly he slept; she was sure that his sleep was dreamless, that his was perfect rest. Would it not be better, almost, she asked herself, that he should sleep for ever? To what would he awake? Who had done this thing to his wife which had brought her to death's door, which would, maybe, send her through it? She was, of course, familiar with some of the tales which were being told; she had heard it more than whispered that there had been a furious quarrel between the husband and the wife. What had he done to her as a finish to their quarrel? If he had not done it with his own hand, was he not the cause? And then the man who had been found in the fish-pond? It was not strange that he had tried to destroy himself with these offences on his soul. Would it not be better for all concerned if he never woke again?

She went back to her sermon, appreciating its meaning less even than before She constrained herself to keep her eyes upon the page, for she had a notion that she might gain that from the printed words which would enable her to look through the cloud which had all at once enveloped her to God's clear sky beyond. But her hope remained unrealised, she might keep her eyes fastened on the page, she could not compel her brain to grasp what she saw there. Her mind was occupied with the tale she had heard from Sarah Ellis, the sleeper filled what little there was left of it. When Andrew returned, he found her full of dark forebodings, which were made all the darker because she was able to say nothing of them to him; until the night came, and then all was told

George Blake was still asleep when the keeper and his wife retired to rest; they kept early hours. In summer, if Holt had had his way, he would have gone to bed with the sun and been up with its rising At that season of the year young pheasants were just coming into the world, at The Beeches a large number of them were brought up by hand, their nurseries were in the special charge of the under-keepers, whose duty it was to keep watch and ward over them by night as well as by day. It was Holt's custom sometimes to go round by night, without warning, to see if the guardians were at their posts. He set forth on such a round in the small hours of that Monday morning, leaving his wife to finish the

night alone. Before going he looked in on Mr. Blake, to find him still at rest.

When Holt returned the dawn was just breaking in the sky As he neared his cottage his keen ears caught an unwonted sound, at that hour someone was abroad besides himself. Voices were proceeding from his cottage. He quickened his pace The voices became more audible with each step he took, he recognised the speaker.

"It's Sarah Ellis and Martha; now what's in the wind?"

At the open cottage door he found them in animated conversation The figure of a woman with a shawl over her head, whom he recognised as Mrs Ellis, was talking to his wife, who was standing in the keen morning air in a state of considerable undress

"Sarah Ellis," demanded Holt as he came striding down the path, "what does this mean? What brings you here at this time of the morning?"

The answer came quickly enough, though it was one which took him back

"Andrew, Mrs. Blake's at our place, dying."

She dropped her voice as she uttered the last word. He inquired what she meant.

"I was over in the afternoon; I told Martha all about it then."

He glanced at his wife.

"She didn't say a word to me."

"She was quite right, I told her not to; but

I told her that if Mrs Blake got worse I'd come and tell you myself. She is worse, she's dying"

Her breath coming in little gusts showed the agitation she was in, and the haste she had made. The keeper stared at her.

"You two women may know what you're talking about, I don't, what do you mean by saying that Mrs Blake's at your place and that she's dying?"

"I can't stop to tell you now, I can't; mother's all alone with her, I don't know where Mr. Norton is, I didn't dare go to the house to ask. The doctor is a stranger to me, I don't know where he lives, he always comes with Mr. Norton. When I saw that there was a change, I didn't know what to do I thought the best thing would be for me to come to you; you'll understand better than me. Andrew, Mr. Blake did ought to be told. Mr. Norton, he says not, and Mrs Blake, she says not, but I say yes. Seems to me that if she was to die, and Mr. Blake wasn't to know, with his heart breaking all the time for news of her, he'd never forgive him, and I'd never forgive myself either. Andrew, Mr. Blake did ought to know, don't you think he ought to know? Couldn't you go round to the house and tell him?"

The keeper and his wife exchanged looks their thoughts were with the occupant of their best bed The wife, leaning forward, whispered in her husband's ear, echoing her cousin's words.

"Andrew, he did ought to know."

The complexity of the position moved the keeper to a sudden show of anger, he saw more sides of the question than they did

"Woman, do you think I don't know that he ought to know? But who's to tell him?"

In his warmth Holt had raised his voice much louder than he had intended An unexpected answer came from within, in the form of a series of questions

"What's all this going on? Who is that chattering away at this time of night? Holt, is that your voice?"

The speaker was George Blake. Since his slumbers had nearly lasted the clock round, it was not unlikely that, having slept his sleep pretty well right out, it needed very little to rouse him; that little the conversation at the doorway had supplied. The trio eyed each other, for a moment each was at a loss for words. Mr. Blake spoke again.

"Is that you, Holt? What has happened? Didn't you hear me asking?"

This time Holt answered

"Yes, Mr. Blake, I did, and it's not a very easy thing, sir, for me to tell you"

The keeper stepped into the house There was neither lamp nor candle, the sun was not yet up in the heavens. There in the half light stood George Blake, just as he had risen out of bed

"Not easy to tell me? Holt, what's—what's wrong?"

As the keeper had said, it was indeed not easy to tell him, but, somehow, it was done between them. As Blake listened it became clear that the rest had done him good, outwardly at least, he had become more like his usual self; his wearied brain had become less wearied, he was quick to grasp the meaning of all they had to tell him

"Young Norton brought her to you on Thursday afternoon?"

The question was addressed to Sarah Ellis, and it was she who answered.

"Yes, sir, and a dreadful sight she was, I never see nothing like it, never, and she so lovely. She was that faint and weak, I thought at first that she was dead, and in spite of what the doctor said, or Mr. Norton either, she's been near to death's door ever since; and now—she going"

Certainly, George Blake was calm, however his heart might have been thumping against his ribs.

"I'll get into my clothes, and, Holt, you go down to the house and tell them to let me have a motor-car up at once. The ground is dry, they'll be able to bring it through the woods. Why do you hesitate?"

"Excuse me, sir, but the police are down at the house."

"The police! At the house! What are they doing there? Surely, Watson hasn't sent for the police?"

"I don't know about Mr Watson, sir, but Mr Cox did."

"Cox! What the devil business had Cox to do a thing like that?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but might I speak a word with you in your bedroom?"

Mr. Blake led the way back into the room in which he had spent the day; while he put himself into his clothes, Holt gave him an idea of what the situation really was, so far as he knew it Mr. Blake's amazement was as genuine as it was great, to Andrew Holt's profound relief He had feared—he dared not think what To hear George Blake's whole-hearted expressions of surprise at the idea that anyone could have supposed that he was guilty of the crime which had been committed did the keeper good, he became rapidly convinced that whoever might be responsible for Edgar Halsey's presence in the fish-pond it was not his master

"So the blackguard was drowned, was he? I'm afraid, Andrew, that it served him right, and, between ourselves, I did very nearly throw him in, but the man told me he could swim. When I threatened to throw him in he told me, jeeringly, that he was like a duck in the water, that if I did do it he'd make me pay for his ducking."

"It doesn't look as there was much of a duck about him. Why, he n a foot of the shore when they found h

"But, Holt, even a man who can swim may be drowned within a foot or two of the shore. There are plenty of weeds in the fish-pond"

The keeper thought of what had happened earlier in the day, which had gone to show that even a strong swimmer might be drowned, if he had set his mind on it.

"I can tell you this, Holt, that whoever threw the man into the water, I didn't, but all the same, if the police are down at the house, and have got the idea in their heads which you say they have, it may be just as well that they shouldn't learn my whereabouts until—until it suits me. I'll do without a car, I'll walk to Rogate. I feel as if I could walk almost as fast as a car could carry me, and you shall walk with me; you can travel. Do you know where the place is?"

"As well as I know where my own house is."

"Then send that woman back and tell her we will follow."

They did more than follow, the two men. Sarah Ellis was sent back alone, and made what haste she could, she had not gone very far before the two men caught and passed her. They had both of them been great walkers in their day, but though neither was any longer in his first youth, they had never gone over the ground quicker than they covered those five miles then The sun had risen; there was that haze in the air which the sunrise sometimes seems to bring;

but in spite of the haze there was a glow which is only to be found in the first dawn of a fine day. They spoke little; the little that was said was on topics which were remote from the one with which, no doubt, both their minds were filled Blake asked how the young birds were doing, if they were feeding well, if they promised to be strong on the wing. When, crossing the stile, they got on to the Rogate property, Blake pointed out how parched the fields were looking, how much in want of rain.

"Is this the only way to the house?" he asked, struck by its roughness "Isn't there a road by which vehicles can get to the house?"

"There's a cart track; I haven't been along it this many a day, but it used to be a pretty bad one"

"Have we much farther to go?"

Holt detected a catching in the speaker's voice, and knew that, as he had suspected all along, this show of calmness was the merest veneer—that behind it the man was like a seething volcano

"We are within a quarter of a mile—maybe a trifle less",

"That's good" Then Mr. Blake put what seemed to the keeper—coming from him—to be a curious question "Andrew, have you ever quarrelled with your wife?"

A grin wrinkled the keeper's dour features A sense of humour was not his strongest point, he not only joked—he smiled with difficulty. As might have

been expected from the man, in his reply there was a homely wisdom.

"Were there ever two men who lived together who didn't quarrel—whiles? Why shouldn't it be the same with a man and a woman? Do you think, sir, that marriage changes human nature? But if the two men are of the right stuff, their quarrel's soon over, and maybe they're better friends It's the same with a man and a woman—the quarrel's forgotten when it's done—they're none the worse for it. It's only fools whose lives are spoilt by such trumpery stuff as quarrels"

George Blake was still; it might have been because he was considering the keeper's words. Presently Holt spoke again

"There's the place, sir; yon house among the trees"

In spite of himself, something happened to Mr. Blake which made him tremble from head to foot; there was a sudden swimming in his head, so that the world seemed to be reeling round him He not only had to stand still, he had to grip his companion's arm to keep himself from falling

"You've been going too fast, sir; you'd better sit down awhile and rest."

The expression of concern on the speaker's face was so sincere that, for some cause, when Blake became conscious of it, it seemed to tickle him, and even to move him to a wintry smile He

shook his head; it was yet a moment or two before he was able to speak; and when the words came they were strange ones.

"Andrew, in the days of old they used to ask a thing of God, and used to promise that if the thing was granted they would raise, on the spot on which the petition had been offered, a monument which should be a proof to all men of God's infinite mercy and grace. If the petition which is in my heart is granted, what monument, Andrew, ought I to raise?"

The man's words were almost as strange as the master's.

"I've always been taught, sir, that God makes no bargains; that what He gives is given without payment and without thought of price. What God gives He gives for nothing."

"If He will only give me one thing now!"

CHAPTER XXIX

TOGETHER

SHE was in such a state of weakness that it was not easy to tell when she passed from consciousness to delirium, or back again. She lay so inert that were it not for the occasional twitchings of the fingers which lay outside the coverlet, one might have supposed that she had lost all power of movement Only in that one respect had she shown signs of active life—she would not keep her hands inside the bed With the exception of her hands she had stayed motionless for more than four-and-twenty hours, sometimes with her eyes open, sometimes with them shut, and every now and then she would utter words aloud, but whether she supposed herself to be speaking to some particular person, or expressed unconsciously the thoughts of her wandering mind, it was not easy to determine.

In one regard she was fortunate; her mind seemed, for the most part, to be dwelling on pleasant themes. They say that when we are near the end a merciful hand not infrequently blots out those things which, in health, we do not find it easy to forget. Perhaps

it was so with her. She had never looked more beautiful. She always had been remarkable for the purity of her expression; now something had come into her face which made her loveliness seem almost unearthly. The two women, Mrs Jackson and her daughter, had watched this something coming with an increasing sense of awe; they knew what it portended

The poor are more familiar with death than the rich, they come oftener into close contact with it; so that to the woman in the cottage it is apt to be a less dreadful spectacle, in a physical sense, than to the lady in the great house. Old Mrs. Jackson had been by so many death-beds that they had almost become to her the commonplaces of existence. Her chief concern in this case was not that the woman was dying in the full pride of her beauty, and in what should have been the prime of her life, she had seen that sort of thing so often among women of her own class that she counted it as nothing; what she feared was that death might come while she was alone with her. That was a conclusion distinctly not to be desired. Why did Sarah not make more haste? Why did the doctor not come—or even that harum-scarum Mr. Norton? It was he who had put them in this pickle. A nice to-do there might be if, before someone was to come, she was dead. Suppose Sarah's errand proved not to be fruitless, and Mr. Blake came to find her gone—what then? Would he not put all

the blame upon their shoulders for having kept her hiding-place hidden in obedience to young Norton's orders? She kept fidgeting from the bed to the door, and back again. There was not a sound outside—not a soul in sight; and each time she went back to the bed she feared to find the fatal moment had come, and that the shadow of death was already stealing into the room.

Such strange, disconnected sentences kept coming from the poor thing's lips; it troubled Mrs. Jackson to have to hear them. One thing she said over and over again, and had kept on saying it ever since this state had come upon her:

"Oh! how I did love him!"

She would say those six small words, and then stay still. Whether or not she knew what she was saying, Mrs. Jackson could not make sure, her mind was evidently dwelling on a single theme, on which, judging from her tone and the look upon her face, she was content to dwell. Sometimes the sentence took a slightly varied form.

"If I could only have made him understand how much I loved him!"

On this Mrs. Jackson commented after a fashion of her own.

"There's many a one has said that, my dear, but they either never do get them to understand or understanding comes too late."

Whether the woman in the bed heard, or, hearing,

if the words conveyed to her any meaning, was not plain

"Oh! how I did love him!"

The same refrain—again, and again, and again. All at once she startled Mrs Jackson by asking a coherent question.

"Will it be very long before it's day?"

The old woman looked round at her, still not very sure if she knew what she had said.

"Why, my dear, the day is close at hand."

It seemed clear that this time she understood; her next words seemed to show it.

"I hope it will be fine"

"Why, my dear, it will be a beauty of a day; there's not been a cloud all night, and now there's a glow in the sky which means it will be glorious. Are you feeling easier, ma'am? Is there anything I can do for you? Here's the stuff the doctor left—it's time you took some." The exquisite lips were pressed more closely together, as if the suggestion was distasteful. "Well, well, my dear, you shan't, I've small faith in doctors' stuff myself But you did ought to have something, it's hours and hours since you had bite or sup Let me give you something, if 'tis but a drop of the brandy Mr. Norton brought."

But the lips said no, and the old woman acquiesced in the refusal The doctor had laid it down as a positive injunction that before all else the patient

was not to be worried. He had said, speaking more plainly than he might have done had he been an older practitioner, that this was a case in which medicine could do little; the recovery, if it came, would take a shape with which doctors had nothing to do

The minutes stole by. Would Sarah never come? Or—anyone? Mrs. Jackson liked the look of her less than ever; to the old woman the few words she had unexpectedly uttered were charged with the most mysterious meaning. Was the day close at hand? Yes, indeed, the unending day. Or was it the unending night?

Presently a still stranger thing happened She moved in bed; for the first time since she had been laid in it, with a sudden convulsive movement she turned right round.

"My dear!"

There was a look on her face which the old woman saw with something more than amazement—a look of intelligence which had not been on it since she had been inside that house Her eyes were wide open, she seemed to be gazing at something which was hidden from the other.

"Listen! There's someone speaking"

Although advanced in years, Mrs. Jackson's hearing was as good as ever, she listened—there was not a sound It was her policy, in such cases, not to contradict; she humoured her.

"Whose voice do you think you hear, my dear?"

The reply, and the manner in which it was spoken, took the old lady completely aback.

"George!"

She positively raised herself a little in bed. Mrs. Jackson took it that some new form of delirium was approaching, prefacing the end

"Who is George?"

The other's behaviour, which came as a sort of rejoinder, scattered, as it were, the old woman's wits in all directions. The other not only raised herself up a little, she sat straight up in bed, and a change came into her face which would have startled a wiser person than the one beside her. What looked very like perception as well as intelligence had come back to her all in an instant, as by a sort of miracle.

"It's my husband—it was his voice, I heard him speaking—it's George! What am I to do? Oh, what shall I do?"

It seemed incredible to Mrs. Jackson that strength could have come back to her like this, in a flash, from nowhere, and yet there was no mistaking the fact that both in her voice and in her manner there was strength altogether beyond anything she had hitherto shown. She was shaking, not with weakness, but with excitement and agitation, something all at once had touched her in the very depths of her being, so that, as from some secret fount, there had sprung up

in her a new consciousness of life. It was Mrs. Jackson who had become a weakling now; after all, she was old, this thing which was taking place before her eyes was as incomprehensible as it was unlooked for. It was not strange that in her trembling bewilderment she was at a loss what to say or do; she was oppressed by an eerie feeling that before her eyes one had risen from the dead.

The woman's conduct in the bed grew more and more astounding; she turned to Mrs. Jackson as with actual anger, demanding of her she knew not what.

"Can't you help me? Don't you hear me asking you what I'm to do? It's my husband—I mean it's George Blake. He's coming here, I heard his voice. He mustn't find me—he'll kill me, I tell you, he'll kill me if he finds me here! What am I to do?"

The astonished Mrs. Jackson tried to stammer something, though what it was even she could probably not have said, but at sight of the patient showing an inclination to get out of bed did move her to articulate speech.

"My dear, you mustn't do that! My dear! my dear!"

The other gripped her convulsively by both her shoulders, and in the grip there was strength which was surprising in one who just now seemed too weak to move.

"Hide me! Do you hear, you must hide me! You mustn't let him find me here—you mustn't let him! He's coming! Tell me, where am I to hide?"

"But, my dear, who's coming? There's no one!"

But in that the old woman proved to be at fault. Even as she spoke footsteps were heard without; someone tapped at the front door, it was opened. A voice said

"Mrs. Jackson!"

The old woman recognised the voice.

"It's Andrew Holt, thank God, Sarah's brought him."

The steps entered the house, the steps of two persons. Mrs. Jackson had recognised the speaker by his voice; her companion recognised one of those who had entered by his footsteps, with a sudden show of frenzy which frightened the old lady out of her few remaining wits.

"It's George! It's George! Don't let him find me here! Don't! Don't! Don't!"

But he did find her, and that while the words still trembling on her lips. The door opened, Blake came in. What the woman in the bed, sudden strange hysteria, had feared she only knew. What did happen an instant George Blake was on the bed, with his arms about her, ...

on his breast like a broken-hearted child. Andrew Holt followed his master into the room, just far enough to take Mrs Jackson by the shoulder and lead her out; and when both of them were out, shutting the door, he said to her, in his curt, masterful tones.

"Woman, it were best to leave those two alone."

And they were left alone; they never knew for how long, but the sun was well up in the sky before they had made an end of saying to each other the things which had to be said And many of the things which were said were of the strangest kind, especially considering the positions of the persons who said them.

She told him of the agony she had suffered, and he covered her with kisses as she said it; for all the time he had his arms about her, and all the time she pressed herself against him. She told him of what she had done with the scissors, and hid her face against his breast, and shook so that he found it hard to keep himself from shaking also And when she had done her telling, he told her just one thing, though he took a good many words to do it In substance it amounted to this that whoever's wife she might be in the eyes of the law, in the sight of Heaven she was his, and his she should be. It was an odd position for a magistrate to take up; it frightened her, though she shook again with the delight of knowing that

he still would have her for his own. All the same, she whispered in his ear that it could not be.

"It can be," he told her, "and it shall. You love me?" As if he needed to ask the question; she did not seem to think it necessary to answer it, no doubt rightly deeming that her attitude was enough. "How much I loved you I didn't even guess until I'd nearly lost you. I tell you you're my wife in God's sight, and you shall be. Who is this man, that he has any right to you? He has none, I tell you, he has none."

"But, George——"

"But me no buts; I will not have them. There is not any court of equity in the whole wide world which would hold that he has any more right to you than Andrew Holt, my head-keeper, and Andrew has got a wife already I doubt if there is any court of law which would hold it either What right can so utter and contemptible a scoundrel have to such a woman as you, the wife of my bosom, the mother of my child? Doris, do you know that all this time I've not the faintest notion of the rascal's name? I never asked you, and you didn't volunteer it; but now that he and I must have a few passages together, it is necessary that I should know"

"You've met him."

"Doris! I've met him!"

As if involuntarily, he had drawn a\

She, reaching out, drew him back, closer,

were possible, even than before; as if now indeed she needed the rock of his support. Although her face was pillowed on his breast, her voice had sunk so low that to enable him to catch her words he had to bend his head.

"He's your friend."

"My friend? Doris! What friend?"

"Gilbert Watson."

There was silence. If she had seen his face she would have known how on a sudden it was transformed; but she took care not to see it; she held him tighter, and hid her face the more. Just now her heart had seemed to be racing; now, all at once, it was standing still. She wished he would speak, say something, do something; even if he crushed the life clean out of her; anything, rather than that he should stay so still.

After what seemed to her to be an infinity of waiting, words did come.

"I don't understand."

"Oh, George!"

It was like a sob which rent her being. He tried to steady himself, conscious that he needed all his self-control. The tragedy was taking another shape; horror was being piled upon horror, it seemed that the worst horror was still to come. He did his best to keep a tight hold over himself, plainly he would need to have all his wits about him if he had to look this thing in the face.

"Tell me clearly, Doris, what you wish me to understand, so that there may be no possibility of misunderstanding. Do you mean that Gilbert Watson who is at The Beeches?" Her sobs told him. His face grew sterner. "But it's beyond my comprehension. Does he know?"

"He must"

"And he hasn't dropped a hint of it to me."

"George!"

"But the man must be the arch-fiend himself. Never by so much as a sign has he hinted that you and he are not perfect strangers"

"If you only knew how he used to play a part with me."

"Was that why he didn't want to listen to my story? Yet when he did he didn't turn a hair; I could have sworn that it all was new to him; that he felt for me with every fibre of his being What an actor the man must be, what a devil!"

He made as if to rise, she tightened her hold.

"George!"

It was a cry of appeal; but he had to harden his heart, to shut his ears

"Doris, you must loosen me, for a moment, only for a moment, I'll come back to you again."

"If you go, you won't come back to me, ever."

"Sweetheart, nothing shall ever part you from me while I have life; not Gilbert Watson, nor fifty

Gilbert Watsons; only you must understand that this has come as a shock to me—the man's identity. I had not dreamed that it could be he; I have to get the idea focussed; and to do that I need space, and air. Loose me, sweetheart, for a moment; when I have got the idea well into my head, and you have told me all about it, I'll take you in my arms again, and I'll defy Gilbert Watson to take you out."

"George, I've told you all there is to tell, every word, that night. We've been playing blind man's buff with each other, George; you never told me your friend's name, and I never asked. I didn't know it, I didn't know he was alive, until I saw it on the envelope on which you'd written it; then Cox told me." Instead of loosing him she clung still tighter. "Don't you see that it was because he was coming that I had to go?"

"Does he know who you are?"

"That's what I've been wondering."

"But I showed him your portrait."

"Then he must know."

"What—what an actor he must be! Not a sign escaped him that he had ever seen your face before. Who would have guessed that he was looking at the face of the woman——" He stopped short, as if it was beyond his power to carry the sentence to its dreadful finish. "What I find so hard is, as I tell you, to get the man into focus, to understand what kind of creature

he really is. He must have known what kind of woman you are"

"He ought to."

The words were sighed rather than spoken.

"Then he must have known that in coming to The Beeches, to meet me and you, that he was about to face a situation from which I should have thought that even the abnormal villain would have shrunk. This can't be a man, this must be a monster."

CHAPTER XXX

JACK GRAHAM

MR. BLAKE, opening the door of the lady's apartment, came out into the living-room beyond. The two women were busy with household duties. He addressed the younger.

"Mrs. Blake is going to get up; will you give her what assistance she requires?"

Mother and daughter looked from each other to him, and back to each other, their looks showing the surprise they felt. Sarah Ellis stammeringly attempted what was probably meant to be remonstrance.

"Get up? Mrs. Blake? But, sir, the doctor——"

She got no further, Mr. Blake cut her short.

"Never mind the doctor, never mind anything, but just do as I tell you; Mrs. Blake is getting up, I shall be obliged by your giving her the assistance she requires."

Sarah Ellis passed into the inner room, amazement, approaching stupefaction, writ large all over her. Andrew Holt looked in at the open doorway.

"You still here, Andrew! I'm afraid we've been

an inordinate time; it's very good of you to have waited; but I don't think there is likely to be anything to detain you longer."

He went out to the keeper in the garden. Holt eyed him with his shrewd brown eyes.

"The gift's been given, sir?"

"The gift? The one for which I prayed? Oh, yes, Andrew, it's been given, in a sense, but gifts sometimes have two edges, Andrew; this one has."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir; maybe it's early days to judge, and it's better than you think. At least Mrs. Blake isn't quite so ill as Sarah Ellis fancied."

George Blake smiled; he seemed to detect a touch of irony in the speaker's tone.

"No, Andrew, thank God, she isn't. I fancy she has made an almost miraculous recovery. Now I want to take her somewhere where she won't be worried."

"Take her straight away? Is she well enough for that, sir? That's good hearing."

"What I'm wondering is, how it's to be managed. That nonsensical stuff they are talking down at The Beeches about Edgar Halsey makes it awkward. If it weren't for Mrs. Blake I'd soon put an end to it; but that's just it, I don't want her to be worried. Which is the nearest place from which you can get a vehicle of some kind without going to The Beeches?"

"There's The Ploughman's Rest along the road,

sir; they have a wagonette. If you like I'll go and bring it over and drive it myself"

"That's not a bad idea, Holt, if you will. Don't be any longer than you can help."

Mr. Blake stayed out in the garden after the keeper had gone. There it was easier to breathe than in the house. He had so many problems to resolve that the time went quicker than he thought; it seemed as if he had only been there a minute or two when word was brought that the lady was ready. Sarah Ellis, who brought it, spoke a warning word to him as he went in.

"She's not strong, sir, it's excitement which has made her seem so, she's weaker than you think, I doubt if she ought to be out of bed. She has had nothing to eat or drink, to speak of, since I don't know when."

"That's easily remedied. I'll see that she has food enough."

"But, sir, she won't eat it; we've all sorts in the house, Mr. Norton saw to that"

He left her to finish her sentence as she chose, perhaps the reference to Bryan Norton caused him to quicken his pace. He hurried into the lady's room. She was sitting, fully dressed, on a chair, from which she rose as he came in. Her weakness was made plain enough to him then—it startled him—she had to lean on the back of the chair to help her to stand.

"Doris, you ought to have stayed in bed."

"George, how could I, when I was going away with you?"

"I shall have to put you straight to bed when I get you away. They tell me you've eaten nothing."

"I can't eat here; I'll eat all you want me to when you've got me away from here. How are we going?"

"Andrew Holt has gone to fetch a vehicle."

"Andrew Holt? Will he tell?"

"Andrew is like the man who had the gift of keeping silence in fifteen languages. Tell? Not he; if they racked him I believe he'd keep his own counsel on matters in which I'm concerned. He'll be back presently"

"There he is."

Both listened, she seeming glad of the support of the arm which was round her.

"There's someone, but it doesn't sound like a wagonette and Andrew, that's more like a motor-car. It is one, there's no mistaking the noise those gentlemen make. What undesirable person is coming worrying in a motor-car?"

There was a tapping at the door, then Mrs Jackson appeared

"If you please, sir, I think this is the doctor. Mr Norton generally brings him in his motor-car."

Mr. Blake said something under his breath which was flattering neither to the doctor nor to Mr. Norton. The sound ceased, Mrs. Jackson explained.

"They can't bring the car right up to the house, sir, nor yet close to the garden, the road's so bad. You'll see them in a minute coming down the garden path."

The persons they did see presently were not the ones they had expected. Three figures came hurrying down the path, then into the house. Bryan Norton was in front. He saw Mrs. Jackson standing with the open door in her hand

"Hullo, old lady, what's the matter?" Apparently he saw in the look which was on her face, as well as on her daughter's, that something unlooked for had occurred. "I hope there's nothing wrong" He dropped his voice. "How's the patient?" He had advanced far enough into the room to enable him to see through the door which the old woman was holding open; the language to which he gave utterance at the sight of what he saw was in his most characteristic vein. "Great Cæsar's ghost! Out of bed! And old Blake. What the, which the, where the—does all this mean!" He turned to someone who was behind him. "Now, Mr. Watson, the scene couldn't have been better set if you'd been your own stage manager."

Gilbert Watson advanced towards the open doorway, Mrs Jackson moving aside to let him through. At sight of him there came a cry of rage from Blake.

"You damned infernal villain!"

His manner suggested that from words he would

pass to action, quickly, had not the lady detained him by holding tightly to his arm.

"George! Who is this? What do you mean?"

Bryan Norton, at Mr. Watson's back, was perfectly willing to act the *rôle* of mischief-maker in chief.

"Now, Mr. Watson, are you prepared to deny, to her own face, your wife?"

"Mr. Norton!" the lady cried.

"Never was a gentleman more gifted with the capacity for denial. Now, sir, deny again."

It was the lady who replied, with in her voice a very singular intonation.

"George, what does Mr. Norton mean? Who is this gentleman?"

On George Blake's countenance was a look which recalled that which is seen on a pugnacious dog when confronting a possible enemy.

"I cannot tell you what Mr. Norton means, but surely it is unnecessary for you to ask me who this gentleman is, since this is Gilbert Watson."

"This is Gilbert Watson! But not my Gilbert Watson"

"Then who the devil is he?"

The lady, who had drawn herself a little away from him, suggested by the peculiarity of her bearing that she was struggling, still in doubt as to whether she were asleep or waking, to get at the meaning of some strange dream.

"I cannot tell you whose Gilbert Watson he is, but he certainly is not mine."

"Then, Doris, what on earth did you mean by what you told me only a little time ago? Watson, this is my wife; have you ever seen her before?"

Watson's words could scarcely be regarded as an answer to Blake's inquiry. Thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets, he drew a long breath, as if his feelings were altogether too much for him.

"This is the queerest thing, the very queerest thing, upon my word and honour."

"What do you mean by talking like that, man? Can't you answer a plain question when it's put to you? Have you ever seen this lady before? Answer me, man; answer!"

Blake's agitation was the more marked since Gilbert Watson's calmness seemed to increase. He looked from the lady to the gentleman, and from the gentleman to the lady, with twinkling eyes. When he spoke it was not as if the tragic side of the situation impressed him most.

"No, Blake, I have not seen this lady before, nor, I believe, has she seen me; but I have seen her picture, and now I understand."

The excited Mr. Blake turned to the lady for an explanation.

"Doris, what does the fellow mean? Watson, what do you understand? Speak out, man! Can't you see that I'm on tenterhooks?"

"It's a longish story; and I'm not sure that I am permitted to tell it, but under the peculiar circumstances perhaps it would be better for all of us if it were told now—but in private."

Blake strode to the door.

"Norton, come in. Is that you, Miss Norton? Will you be so good as to come in also?" Sister and brother entered, Blake shut the door behind them. "Now, Watson, let's have *it*. Mr. and Miss Norton know something of the tale already; it's for you to judge if any harm will be done by their knowing more."

"No harm whatever. Mr. Norton, from my point of view, doesn't count."

"Thank you." This was Mr. Norton.

"But as regards Miss Norton, in view of the assertions which her brother has made in her presence, I am very anxious that she should hear the whole story of my association, if it can be called association, with this, I believe, most cruelly injured lady. Then Miss Norton will be able to judge what grounds her brother had for the—something more than doubt, which he cast upon my word—I think, Mrs. Blake—for let me tell you at the very beginning that I have no doubt whatever that you are Mrs. Blake——"

"What—what do you mean? How do you know that? What Gilbert Watson are you? You—you can't be Gilbert Watson, of Long Hinton?"

"I can be, and I am; but I'm coming to those

points shortly. I was about to observe that I think, Mrs. Blake, I am correct in saying that you have never seen me before, even in a photograph."

"That, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I certainly never have. I believe I should have remembered it if I had."

"You pay me a compliment. I saw you, as I have said, in a photograph, and I have the photograph still, I hope you will forgive me if I tell you that I was so struck by the face which was on it, that I could not help but keep it. It is one of the very few things belonging to its original that I still have in my possession; but again I must ask for your forgiveness, it seemed to me so beautiful, that I regarded it as a dream face, someone's ideal of feminine loveliness, rather than the mere commonplace likeness taken from a living model. That is the reason, Blake, why, when you showed me that portrait you have, although it recalled something, I could not think what. Honestly, I hadn't a notion that the picture ever had an original, I regarded it as a picture only; possibly a photographic reproduction of some great painting."

"Hear, hear! You've rather a neat way of turning compliments, Watson, when you're put to it; and you do it with an air as if a compliment were the last thing you intended; you've a masterly way of driving them home"

This was Bryan Norton. Possibly his words were

the cause of the faint blush which came on the lady's pale cheeks, but the others ignored him utterly. George Blake showed an inclination towards impatience.

"Pray, Watson, where did you find this remarkable photograph? How did it ever come to be in your possession?"

"I found it among Gilbert Watson's papers."

"Gilbert Watson! Then are there two of you?"

"Blake, this is a queer world, and you yourself have a memory like a sieve. You didn't recollect me when I met you that afternoon in Pall Mall."

The charge seemed to take Mr. Blake a little aback.

"Not at the first moment, perhaps, but I did directly afterwards."

"I know! You came marching out of St. James's Street, I was about a hundred yards along Pall Mall, but I knew you the moment you were round the corner. 'Now,' I said to myself, 'I wonder if he knows me?' And you didn't."

"I tell you I mayn't have done the first moment—I was thinking of some business I'd been doing—but I did inside five seconds."

"Stuff! You had a hazy recollection, but you couldn't place me. As for your memory, you'd not only forgotten my name, you've forgotten it still, you don't even know it at the present moment."

George Blake's confusion was obvious, he looked as if he could not make the other out at all.

"Not know your name! Not know it! Why, why you told me it was Gilbert Watson."

"I did, and it is; but it wasn't when you first knew me, in those days of auld lang syne on which you waxed so eloquent."

Mr. Blake's agitation did not become less marked, he began to fidget about the room as if his joints were hung on springs which compelled him to keep moving; his remarks were as odd as his movements.

"This beats—this does beat anything! Of all the extraordinary things! Doris, do you know—— Well, it's no use my saying anything because I hardly know how to put it myself, but the fact is, look here, I'll make an open confession. I'll just show you what an ass a normally sensible man can make of himself. Do you know all the time I had it at the back of my head that I couldn't recall the name 'Gilbert Watson' as having been with me at Rugby? And yet you were there, I recollect you perfectly; I recollect a dozen things about you, I recollect that we were chums."

"Oh, yes, we were chums, we were great chums in those days. They called you David, and they called me Jonathan."

"Of course, I know they did I recall all that, remember it perfectly; lots of it as if it had only happened yesterday, but, for the life of me, I can't recall your—your——"

"Beastly name That's right, say it."

"I was about to say, that for the life of me, I can't recall your name, but, all the same, when you told me it was Gilbert Watson, I had a feeling that it wasn't."

"I was pulling your leg; though I confess I was a little surprised to find it so easy."

"I couldn't charge you, to your face, in the middle of Pall Mall, with saying the thing which was not."

"Oh, couldn't you? You could, and you would, if you'd thought of it, but you didn't. My dear Blake, when you and I were together at Rugby I was Jack Graham."

"Jack Graham! Of course!" Mr. Blake's conduct was as extraordinary as his language; he actually shook his fist in the other's face in the excitement of the discovery. "You dashed old silly idiot, of course you're Jack Graham! What an idiot I am! But how do you come to be Gilbert Watson?"

"That's the story. I had an uncle, Gilbert Watson, of Long Hinton He had two nephews · I was one, his sister's son, the other was his brother's son, who was called after him, Gilbert Watson He was—well, he's dead, and our paths didn't often cross, I fancy his was rather a curly one. He and his uncle didn't get on at all, for various reasons. In fact, he made a mess of things all round—a pretty baddish one. Then he joined the great majority; I was with him when he died"

"You were with him?"

The question was the lady's.

"He died, as perhaps you know, in Africa"

"That was what I was informed."

"Your information was quite correct. You see, it was this way I myself was in Africa at the time. I had a letter from a man I knew. He told me that a chap who said he was my cousin was in his part of the world, and had been making things hum, and that now he was in a precious bad way; and if I really was his cousin, perhaps I'd pass the word to his people, and someone would come along and look after him—he was very much in want of someone who knew him. So I went myself. By the time I got there he was dying, and I can't help saying that under the circumstances it was the best thing he could do. I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs Blake, but it's a fact. He'd been drunk ever since most of the men round there had known him, and latterly it had brought on some sort of delirium tremens, and in one of his fits of madness he'd had difficulties with the natives, in which he had been wholly in the wrong; and they'd made a holy sight of him. The day after I was with him he was dead, and the same day they buried him. He hadn't left much behind him; all the things he had were contained in a skin-covered box. There was a bundle of letters, and some odds and ends, which I burnt; I'd no doubt they related to incidents in his life which were strictly private, and I had not the slightest desire to intrude upon his privacy. One

thing I kept, and that was the photograph of which I've told you; it was wrapped in a piece of tissue paper with the letters. But I'd no idea who it was, I thought it was quite possibly a photograph which he had picked up somewhere of some famous picture."

"How come you to be bearing his name—to have ceased to be Jack Graham?"

"Nothing could be simpler I sent the news of his death to his uncle, who was also mine. He wrote to say that he was getting an old man, of which I was perfectly aware, and that he'd like me to come back to England and go and see him at Long Hinton. I had various little business matters of my own to attend to; I was in no hurry; I had nothing to thank him for, he had never paid me any attention, and he'd behaved very badly to my mother. When I did return to England one of the first things I learned after I landed was that he was dead, and that he had left me all his money, coupled with the eccentric condition that I was to shed my own patronymic absolutely, and adopt his, I was not even to reveal my original identity. There always had been a Gilbert Watson, of Long Hinton, and he wanted there to be one still I wasn't over eager—indeed, all the other way. I never knew much of my father—he died before I was in my teens, but my recollection of him was that he was a trump. My mother, who was as good a judge of a man as I ever saw, used to tell me that her one desire was that I should grow up like

him—and that was good enough for me. I knew had no cause to be ashamed to bear his name. for my uncle, he was, not to put too fine a point o it, a disagreeable old curmudgeon. He quarrelled wi my father because he wouldn't kowtow to him; an when my mother was left in a position in which knew perfectly well that a little help would have ma all the difference, he wanted to impose conditio which it would have been impossible to accept; because she couldn't accept them he quarrelled wı her. So I'd no reason to wish to exchange my na for his, and so I told the lawyers."

"They gave you reasons, I suppose, which we weighty enough to induce you to change your mind?

"Well, my life had been a pretty hard one; wasn't getting younger, and I wasn't getting rich A man who's gone through what I have gets so things knocked out of him. I'm not sure that Sha speare wasn't right, and that 'A rose by any ot name,' you know. I might as well be Watson Graham; but I certainly never bargained for t friend of my boyhood's days forgetting that I w Jack Graham."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE THINGS WHICH WERE SAID

THEY would have gone down to The Beeches five in a motor-car, only, when the point was broached, Gilbert Watson looked at Bryan Norton, and they both went aside with Mr. Blake; in fact, the three men went into the garden together, and there George Blake was informed of what was in the tonneau of the car, under the rugs. So Bryan Norton went to The Beeches in the car, with the dead man as his sole companion. Then, when Andrew Holt arrived with the wagonette from The Ploughman's Rest, Mr. and Mrs. Blake went with him, and Olive Norton and Gilbert Watson walked down together.

It was a walk which neither of them was ever likely to forget. In the first place, because the weather was so fine; in the second, because the way was so fair; and in the third—for other things. They did not say much—possibly because they had so much to say—until they had quitted the high road and were through the gate, and were on the path which led down through the forest to The Beeches. Then certain things were said, as, to begin with, this—by the lady.

"I am so sorry that my brother was rude to you."

"In what way?"

"As to doubt your word when you said what you did."

"You mean, his insisting that I was married?"

"Of course, it was no business of his in any case. It was sheer impertinence on his part to interfere in your affairs at all. As if it made any difference to any one if you were married or if you weren't—except to yourself."

"Except to myself. It would make a differenc to me. Because, of course, if I wasn't married, might want to be."

"Naturally, some men do want to marry some times. Look at that effect of the sunlight gleamin through those beeches—isn't it pretty?"

Apparently he was not interested in the effect o the sunlight through the beeches; at least, he did no treat her question with that courtesy it seemed t deserve.

"How much younger do you think a wife ough to be than her husband?"

"Really! What a question! Is there any 'ought about it? What does it matter?"

"Of course, a girl wouldn't want to marry a m who was years older than herself"

"I don't see why she shouldn't. She wants t marry a man—that is, if she wants to marry at all

and not a boy. Some men don't cease to be boys till they're years older than she is."

"Miss Norton." She looked at him. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She looked away to where the sunlight was glancing through the beech trees.

"I suppose that sort of thing has been known."

"But in the case of a fogey?"

"Who's the fogey?"

"I suppose I am."

She laughed, as if he had been guilty of a joke.

"I didn't think you were so conceited."

He glanced at her, askance

"Conceited? In supposing myself a fogey?"

"It's such a ridiculous assumption—as if, in all essentials, I wasn't years older than you are. But please don't let us talk nonsense. You remember what you said about being sorry that you ever came to The Beeches? It strikes me that, as things have turned out, it was just as well you did."

"I think so too. In any case, whatever reasons I might have had, there was one reason which would have topped all the others, and turned my sorrow into joy."

"And that was?"

"Meeting you."

It was either because the statement was so direct, or because of the tone in which it was said, or because it was so unlooked for—for one of these reasons, or

for some other—for the moment all her breath seeme to be taken away, so that she was left with none t answer; and it was after that that those other thin were said.

As has already been pointed out, it is not likel that that walk will ever be forgotten by either o them, because Olive Norton is now Mrs. Gilbe Watson, as a direct consequence of the things whic then were said.

At the inquest which was held on the body o Edgar Halsey, young Mr. Bryan Norton caused n slight sensation by the frank admission which he mad while in the witness-box. That his conduct had been, to say the least of it, irregular, he candidly allowed. But as no evidence was produced which discredited his rather remarkable story, as the coroner pointed out to the jury, it seemed to him that they had no option but to return a verdict to the effect that the unfortunate man had been accidentally drowned; they might, if they liked, by way of a rider, censure Mr. Norton's behaviour, but beyond that he did not see what could be done. The jury, without leaving the court-room—the inquest was held in the parlour of The Ploughman's Rest—returned as their unanimous verdict two words only—"Found drowned", and they said nothing to Mr. Norton.

Afterwards, when the court-room had become again the bar parlour, and the coroner had gone, the

members of the jury had a little refreshment with Mr. Bryan Norton, and from him they then learnt certain little particulars which he had not thought it necessary to mention to them when they were a jury, which convinced them more than ever that in returning the verdict they had done they had been profoundly right.

Things had not turned out altogether as Inspector Hobden had expected, which perversity of nature, as he appeared to regard it, seemed to cause that zealous officer a certain amount of disappointment. He would have had so excellent an opportunity of earning for himself distinction in the public eye if they had turned out as they might have done; but, if he was disappointed, everyone else rejoiced—which, of course, did not make affairs any pleasanter for him Cox, in particular, was plain spoken to an exasperating degree. The inspector told him, with a sudden burst of candour, that if he had not held the position he did hold, he would have made him take his coat off and treat him to a lesson in manners, whereupon Cox instantly replied that he was quite willing to forget that the inspector was the kind of ass he really was, and take the lesson there and then—a response which did not tend to soothe the inspector's ruffled feelings. When the inspector had taken himself away finally there was perfect peace again at The Beeches, and perfect happiness—a happiness the more perfect because it had suffered such tragic interruption. Mrs.

Simmons had not gone far with the baby; she h only taken him to her own home, that he might removed from the contamination of Gilbert Watso presence; a telegram soon brought maid and ba back again. George Blake is perhaps a little wis than he was. He has learnt that the unusual do happen, and that a man never knows what kind man he really is until "the slings and arrows of ou rageous fortune" have turned his heaven into a hell it is by his bearing in the hour of his agony that yo shall tell the man. He is still the devout lover of hi wife, and as proud as ever to know that all over th county she is spoken of, by high and [illegible] poor, as "the lovely Mrs. Blake."

THE END

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